



MEDIA RELEASE

RSPB Scotland

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Wind farms blamed for death of eagles

Wind turbines have caused the deaths of huge birds of prey on isolated islands off the Norwegian coast.

The discovery of four dead white-tailed eagles, and the failure of almost 30 others to return to nesting sites within the wind farm area, has increased fears that wind farms in Britain could take a similar toll on native and migrating wild birds.

The white-tailed eagle, Europe's largest eagle species, is found in significant numbers on Smøla, a set of islands about six miles (ten kilometres) off the north-west Norwegian coast. The island is listed by BirdLife International as an Important Bird Area because it has one of the highest breeding densities of the bird in the world.

White-tailed eagles are also beginning to thrive in the Western Isles of Scotland as a direct result of a 30-year reintroduction project. Developers regard this area as ripe for wind farm construction too.

Dr Mark Avery, Conservation Director at the RSPB said: These findings are shocking yet may only be the tip of the iceberg. Research on Smøla is being stepped up and if more dead birds are found, and even fewer are able to breed, we will be doubly determined to fight wind farm plans that could cause similar destruction in the UK.

The four dead birds were found between August and December last year. Two had been sliced in half, apparently by a turbine blade. Post mortems blamed multiple trauma for the birds' deaths, caused by a heavy blow. Much of the wind park is remote and rarely visited and it is possible that other deaths have gone undetected.

The 68-turbine Smøla wind farm was built between 2001 and 2005. The Norwegian government ignored advice based on an environmental assessment, warning against the development because of the danger it posed to white-tailed eagles. BirdLife International took the case to the Bern Convention but the decision was not overturned.

Research by the RSPB, the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) and the Norwegian Sea Eagle Project will now be stepped-up to include regular checks for casualties throughout the wind park, and monitoring of this spring's breeding activity.

Conservationists are yet to draw firm conclusions from their initial monitoring because breeding numbers of white-tailed eagles often vary and in 2004 and 2005 especially, construction activity for the second part of the wind park was intense.

But the birds are already known to be deterred from nesting near new roads or buildings. They are also faithful to previous nesting sites, however.

Arne Follestad, a Research Scientist at NINA said: Breeding results on Smøla have been strikingly poor compared with the 30 years before the wind farm was built, both on the site itself and the remainder of the island.

We are only half way through the research, yet despite their site-faithfulness, we are not confident that white-tailed eagles will adapt to the turbines and return to the wind park area. As older birds die, we do not know if new birds will occupy nest sites within the wind farm.

The RSPB strongly supports the generation of wind and other renewable energies to help tackle climate change but this weeks interim research results have underlined the dangers of wind parks placed near sites that birds instinctively seek.

Stuart Housden, Director of RSPB Scotland said: The news from Norway is of great concern to us. If white-tailed eagles have died because of wind turbine collisions, there are major implications for our own eagle populations here in Scotland.

We are campaigning hard against the proposed 234-turbine wind farm for the north Lewis peatlands partly because of the great danger it poses to Scotlands eagles.

This environmentally sensitive site is protected under European law and a large wind farm there could have catastrophic implications for a wide variety of bird species - including both species of our native eagles - and the fragile peatland environment as a whole. This is why we are calling on the Scottish Executive to provide clear strategic guidance to developers to help them avoid such sensitive locations.

Ends.

For more information/interviews/images, please contact RSPB Media Officer Cath Harris on 07739 921464.

Notes.

- The Smøla wind farm is run by Norways national power company, Statkraft. The Norwegian government licensed the company to build the wind park in 2001. The wind farms first 20 turbines started turning in September 2002, the remaining 48 started operating last autumn.
- The wind park covers about 20 square kilometres, an area where at least 16 white-tailed eagle pairs have nested previously.
- Most at risk are raptors and wildfowl because of the heights at which they fly, the habitats they seek and for swans and geese, their inability to change direction quickly.
- Breeding failed entirely in the wind farm area in 2003 and 2004 although some pairs did visit nests. In 2005, two pairs bred successfully. The first produced two young but one was killed by a turbine. The second produced one fledgling.
- Smøla used to attract between 65 and 70 breeding pairs each summer. Numbers elsewhere on the island have dropped as well.
- The Norwegian Institute for Nature Research has fitted satellite tags to 11 white-tailed eagles to monitor survival and movements. The Norwegian Sea Eagle Project has been monitoring the birds population and breeding success for 30 years but there had been no specific studies of eagle behavior until the RSPB pilot study began last autumn.
- White-tailed eagles can live for up to 35 years if left unmolested. They are also site faithful and may eventually adapt to the presence of turbines on their breeding area. Research will need to be extended to check any future adaptation.
- The most common reported cause of death of white-tailed eagles in Norway is collisions with power lines. This is particularly so for young birds.
- The white-tailed eagle became extinct in Britain in 1918 following a prolonged period of human persecution. Trial releases in Britain took place in the 1950s and 1960s (seven birds) after changes to legislation and a decline in raptor persecution created more favourable conditions for the bird. Between 1975 and 1985, 82 young white-tailed eagles from Norway were released on the island of Rum off the west-coast of Scotland. The first clutch of eggs was laid in the wild in 1983 and the first successful breeding occurred in 1985. Initially, population growth was slow, and a further 58 birds, again from Norway, were released on the Scottish mainland between 1993 and 1998. In 2005, there were 33 pairs on territory in Scotland. The best places to see them are the islands of Mull, Lewis and Skye.

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK-wide charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all