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Perceptions and Opinions Regarding the Reintroduction of Eurasian Lynx to England: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract: Globally, national governments have committed to restoring their native biodiversity, which can include the reintroduction of species. Amassing public support can prove difficult when the species is considered a contestable species, such as the Eurasian lynx, *Lynx lynx*, within the UK. Using an e-questionnaire widely distributed across social media platforms enabled the investigation of public perceptions regarding any proposed lynx reintroduction to England. The majority of the public generally supported the idea of a lynx reintroduction to England. Further investigation by societal groups allowed for greater and more detailed knowledge of perceptions, attitudes, and potential barriers to the potential reintroduction of this contestable species. There were varying opinions both negative and positive, between distinct societal groups, while respondent statements highlighted justifications for their positions. A closer investigation identified specific areas for educational efforts and engagement prior to any public consultation. Many negative opinions were based on either a lack of knowledge or misinformation, which highlighted where educational efforts should be targeted. Misinformation appeared rife within the farmer, vet, and wildlife photography groups. The study highlighted that applying both macro- and micro-scale analyses greatly benefits the identification, detail, and specific issues that need to be addressed, therefore enabling more efficient planning of relevant actions to address concerns before proceeding with such a proposal, especially at a time when funding is limited.

Keywords: conservation; reintroduction; Eurasian lynx; contested species; carnivore reintroduction; public perceptions; Kunming–Montreal global biodiversity framework; rewilding

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1. Introduction

Globally, countries make pledges to meet a range of international targets, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, etc., to arrest and preferably reverse the loss of their biodiversity [1,2]. To enact activities that facilitate nations meeting their pledges, nations need the support of their general public, following the 'public trust doctrine' (PTD) [3]. Therefore, managing wildlife for the benefit of current and future generations requires garnering knowledge on the general publics' perspectives across human dimensions to facilitate the implementation of actions [4–6].

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which outlines a vision of living in harmony with nature, urges nations to halt and reverse the loss of their biodiversity by 2050, with concrete targets and measures to be implemented by 2030 [7]. One of the conservation tools utilised by countries to meet such targets is the reintroduction of

extirpated species. The IUCN has established clear guidelines to follow when reintroducing species [8], part of which requires engaging with and listening to the public [9]. This is particularly true when the species proposed for translocation is a contested species, such as an apex predator, which could invoke strong reactions [10], especially when the translocation is conducted within a complex socio-political environment [11].

In England (Figure 1), the regulatory framework for species reintroduction is primarily governed by Natural England under existing legislation frameworks [12]. However, concerns have been raised regarding the efficiency of the licencing regime, with some suggesting that it serves more as a deterrent than an enabler and requires a more streamlined process with greater engagement [12]. Whilst being one of the most species-depauperate countries in the world [13], England has witnessed a few successful species translocation projects, such as red kite, *Milvus milvus* [14], beaver, *Caster fiber* [15], chequered skipper butterfly, *Carterocephalus palaemon* [16], cirl bunting, *Emberiza cirlus* [17], and pool frog, *Pelophylax lessonae* [18].

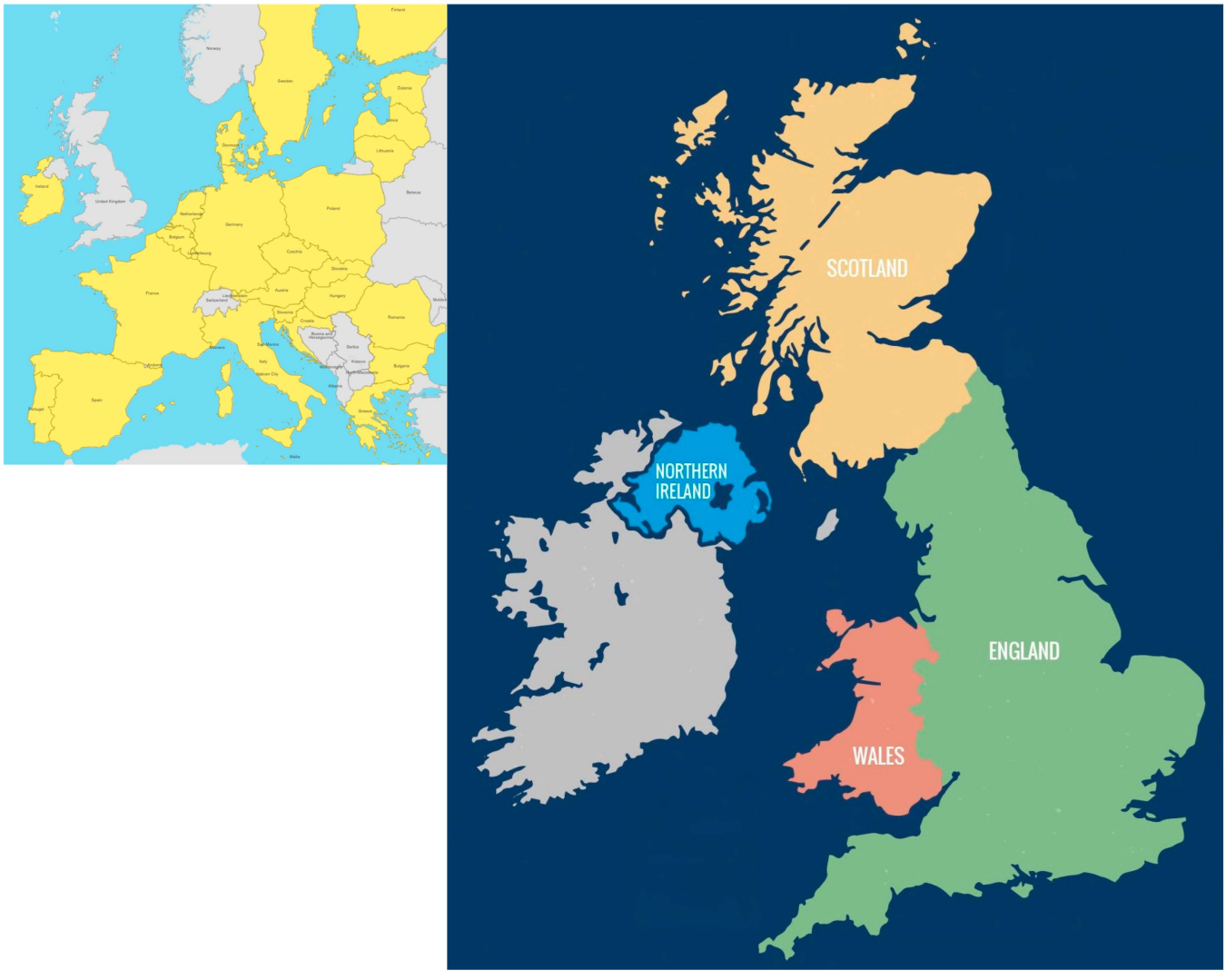

Figure 1. Map detailing the different countries that make up the United Kingdom (UK) and a map of Europe (Source: https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries_en, accessed on 11 November 2024).

The Eurasian lynx, *Lynx lynx*, historically inhabited England [19] and can still be found across a range of habitats and regions within Eurasia, demonstrating their resilience [20,21]. Generally considered an apex predator, lynx play an important role in

prey species population dynamics—especially roe deer, *Capreolus capreolus*, populations, its main prey [21–24]—which in turn promotes a more ecologically functional ecosystem [25]. The extirpation of lynx, and other predators, from the UK has contributed to rising deer populations, including roe deer, which has had damaging effects on UK environments, especially woodlands [20,26]. Currently, culling has been used to reduce deer numbers and mitigate their adverse impacts on woodlands across England [27]. However, with the aim of achieving both government targets and more ecologically functional ecosystems, the reintroduction of lynx has been debated in the UK [28–33]. An initial lynx reintroduction proposal was declined by the UK government for many reasons, such as 'failure to meet IUCN Guidelines' and 'insufficient local support' [34]. Previous studies have also reported general concerns, particularly among farmers and landowners, whilst also acknowledging the complexity and variability of opinions regarding lynx reintroduction to the UK [28,32,35–38]. Farmers were reported to generally oppose the reintroduction of lynx, with potential livestock losses being a main consideration [37,38]. Alternatively, in Germany it was reported that positive attitudes towards lynx reintroduction were influenced by age, education, and profession of the respondents [39]. Conversely, myth and misinformation were reported to underpin the negative attitudes of local people [21]; 68% of respondents thought lynx were harmful to livestock despite just two livestock attacks having been recorded by respondents. Furthermore, 44% stated that lynx were dangerous to humans, even though no attacks on humans had been recorded by participants [21]. More recently, a study based in Scotland (Figure 1) highlighted opposing views regarding lynx reintroduction that reflected competing environmental narratives [28], while a study focused on UK farmers reported negative attitudes overall towards lynx reintroduction [37].

Furthermore, it was important to consider potential impacts relating to tourism, as tourism can offer substantial financial benefits to communities, when managed sustainably [40] and, hence, has the ability to influence decision making [41]. It has been reported that 54% of respondents stated that the lynx were an important factor in tourists' decision to visit the Harz Mountains in Germany [42]; thus, both positively impacting the decision making of those planning to visit, whilst also having positive economic impacts on local communities around the Harz National Park. Following the reintroduction of lynx to the Harz National Park in 2000, the lynx has been effectively used in marketing to attract visitors, featuring prominently in tourism campaigns and promotional materials [43]. Similar strategies could be employed in England. Therefore, understanding public perceptions in this regard is important from an economic perspective.

Currently, knowledge gaps exist regarding the wider human dimensions associated with the potential reintroduction of lynx into England, and the drivers or influences behind these opinions. This study aimed to expand and enhance our knowledge and understanding of the general publics' perceptions towards a proposed lynx reintroduction in England. Specifically, we aimed to (1) identify the levels of positive support or negativity towards a lynx reintroduction into England; (2) identify differences in perceptions across society for a proposed lynx reintroduction to England; and (3) identify any primary concerns and the variance of opinions across societal groups.

2. Materials and Methods

This study explored public perceptions using an online questionnaire, consisting of a total of 19 questions. Perceptions and biases were examined using a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data types, with questions using both purposive sampling and snowball methods of distribution in the study.

JISC Online Surveys (https://www.jisc.ac.uk/online-surveys) was used to host the questionnaire due to the data security features and the ease of managing the data set.

The questionnaire went live on 30 December 2023 and was closed on 20 February 2024. Snowball sampling was used via social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, where posts encouraged recipients to repost the survey. In parallel, purposive sampling collated the email addresses for 10 organisations representing relevant sectors of society (e.g., education, farming, healthcare, landowners, retail, tourism, veterinary, wildlife photography), from which five were randomly chosen by a random number generator to forward the questionnaire. While snowball sampling facilitated access, it introduced bias due to factors such as geographic proximity and personal relationships. Conversely, purposive sampling allowed for theoretical generalisations, but its subjective nature can pose challenges in mitigating researcher bias [44].

Both qualitative and quantitative data types have been presented in this study. Qualitative data were presented equally for all groups and levels, with text mined to provide depth and greater understanding of the qualitative data. Quantitative data, due to data set sizes being small when divided, used non-parametric tests. Spearman's rank correlation was utilised to assess the significance of relationships between variables, while both Mann–Whitney or Kruskal–Wallis tests were applied to compare differences between data sets recorded. Chi-square tests were used to test the significance of observed values recorded against expected values. Significance levels were set at both $p = 0.05$ and $p = 0.01$ thresholds.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institute of Science and Environments ethics committee at University of Cumbria before commencing data collection, in accordance with established ethical guidelines and standards. Following the recommendations of [45], participants provided informed consent, and were provided assurance of anonymity and the option to withdraw at any point. To safeguard the privacy and anonymity of respondents, data protection measures were implemented using JISC, which uses encryption and anonymisation techniques.

3. Results

A total of 84 responses were collected, representing a wide range of ages, locations, and employment types, which were grouped into appropriate categories (Table 1). Where individuals' employment types were considered to be within a similar sector, they were grouped under one sector name to enable representation of a range of societal groups.

Table 1. The ages, societal groups, and geographic locations of respondents to a questionnaire regarding the reintroduction of lynx to England conducted in 2024.

Age Group	n = 84	Societal Groups	n = 84	Geographic Location	n = 84
18–24	18 (21.4%)	Education	17 (20.2%)	East of England	1 (1.2%)
25–34	16 (19.1%)	Healthcare	7 (8.3%)	North East (England)	5 (6.0%)
35–44	15 (17.9%)	Landowner (not an active farmer)	2 (2.4%)	North West (England)	41 (48.8%)
45–54	11 (13.1%)	Retail	13 (15.5%)	South East (England)	2 (2.4%)
55–64	11 (13.1%)	Veterinary	3 (3.6%)	South West (England)	1 (1.2%)
65+	12 (14.3%)	Wildlife Photographer	3 (3.6%)	UK (not specified)	27 (32.1%)
Not specified	1 (1.2%)	Other	39 (46.4%)	Scotland	3 (3.6%)
				Australia	1 (1.2%)
				Belgium	1 (1.2%)
				Denmark	1 (1.2%)
				France	1 (1.2%)

Of the 84 respondents to the questionnaire, nearly 81% thought they knew what a lynx was, while 14% did not and 5% were unsure. Respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of the Eurasian lynx ('0' being nothing at all to '10' being expert) with 'no

knowledge' ('0') being the single most common rating (n = 15, 18%), while just one (1.2%) respondent considered themselves an 'expert' on lynx. Knowledge levels 1 to 9 were arbitrarily grouped into threes (1,2,3 = low level of knowledge; 4,5,6 = little; 7,8,9 = good) resulting in most respondents rating themselves at a low level of knowledge on lynx (n = 32, 38%) or little knowledge (n = 19, 23%), while fewer considered themselves to have a good level of knowledge (n = 17, 20%) (Figure 2). When describing a lynx in open text, 75 (88%) respondents commonly used descriptors such as 'cat' (73%, n = 75) or 'wild cat' (28%), 'large'/'big' (33%) or medium (20%), while 'predator' (13%) or 'apex' (5%) were much less used within descriptions.

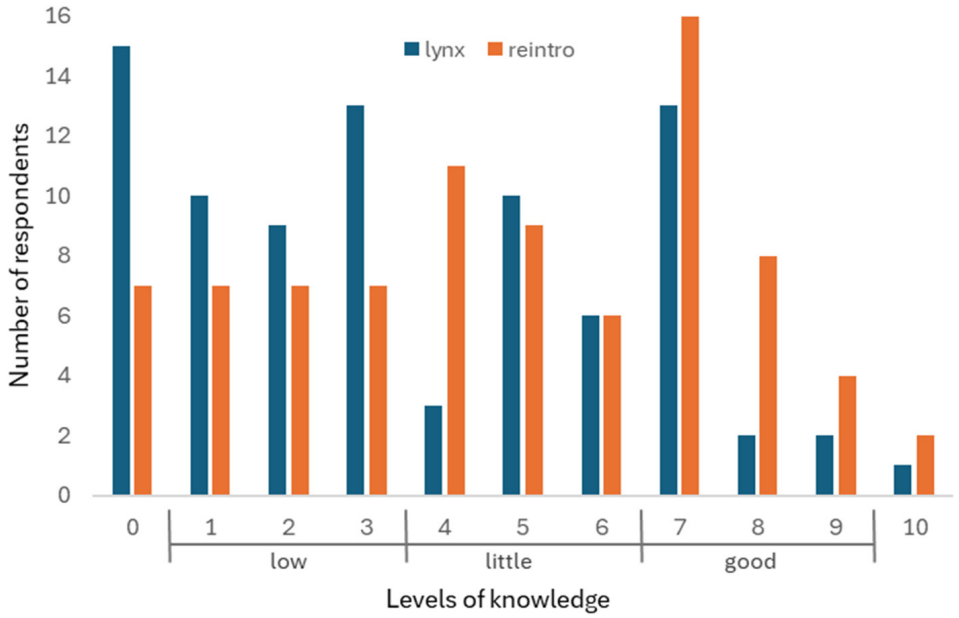

Figure 2. The levels of knowledge people considered themselves to have on lynx (blue bars) and reintroduction (orange bars) as recorded by the 84 respondents to a lynx reintroduction to England questionnaire in 2024. The values contributing to the arbitrary grouped knowledge levels (low, little, good) have been highlighted.

Generally, respondents rated their knowledge on 'reintroduction' ('0' being nothing at all to '10' being expert) higher than that for lynx (mean value for lynx knowledge being 30 while mean reintroduction knowledge was nearly 40; Figure 2). Just seven (8.3%) respondents reported 'no knowledge' ('0') while two (2.4%) respondents considered themselves 'expert'. Most respondents considered themselves to have a good level of knowledge (rating themselves 7,8,9) on reintroduction (n = 28, 33.3%), followed by little knowledge (rating themselves 4,5,6) (n = 26, 31%), while fewer considered themselves to have a low level of knowledge (n = 21, 25%) (Figure 2). Nearly 92% (n = 77) of questionnaire respondents (n = 84) knew of reintroduction as a practice, commonly describing it using a combination of the terms such as 'putting'/'bring'/'bringing back' (n = 34, 43%), 'releasing'/'release' (n = 8, 10%), or 'establishing' (n = 10, 13%) a 'native' (n = 11, 14%) species that 'previously'/'used to be' (n = 20, 25%) there. However, there was no significant difference between the levels of knowledge recorded by respondents for lynx compared with reintroduction in this study ($U = 37$, $n = 20$, $z = -0.95$, $p > 0.05$).

Respondents were asked to report their level of agreement or disagreement with the proposal to reintroduce the Eurasian lynx to England (Figure 3), with scoring ranging from −5 (=strongly disagree) to +5 (=strongly agree), with zero being neutral. In general, there were much greater levels of positive support (n = 56, 66.7%) for lynx being reintroduced than against the reintroduction (n = 11, 13%). There was a statistically significant difference

between the levels of positive support and negative opposition regarding the reintroduction (U = 10.0, n = 10, df = 1, p = 0.008), with greater levels of positive support expressed (Figure 3).

Alongside the values given for individuals' level of support, respondents provided supporting statements. The following are four example statements from each of the negative, neutral, and positive groups that typically express the justification and perceptions of those respondents. The positive and negative statements have been extracted from only the extreme values (−5 and +5) with the aim that these capture the core rationales and divergencies in views. The core themes coming from neutral statements were the need for greater information to make more informed opinions, while negative statements highlighted concerns about lynx attacks (on livestock, people, or pets), an additional predatory pressure on bird populations, and whether drivers that lead to their initial extirpation had been removed. Conversely, positive statements highlighted the need to restore a 'natural balance' within ecosystems and the moral imperative.

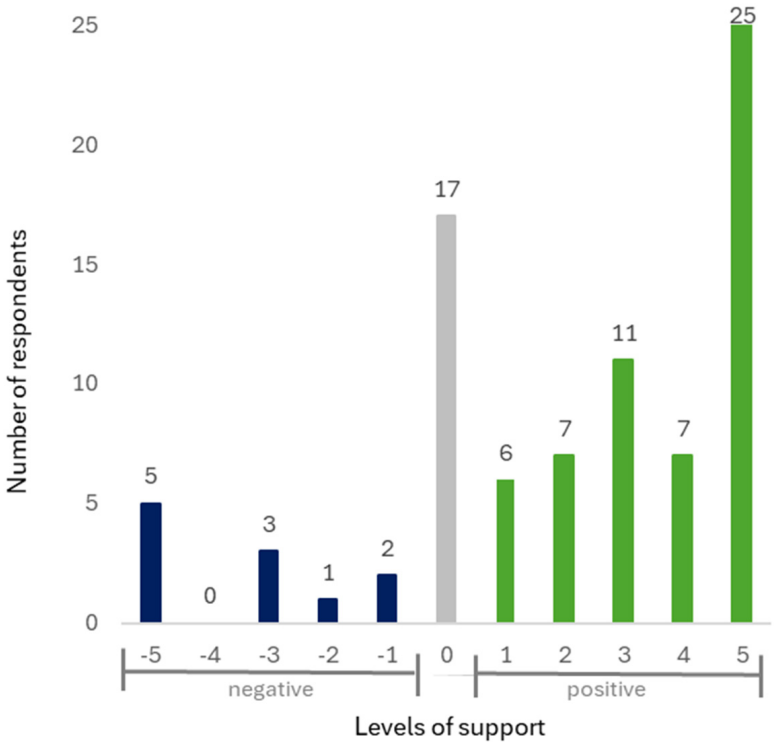

Figure 3. Presented are the levels of positive (green bars), negative (dark blue bars), and neutral (light grey bars) support recorded by the 84 respondents for a potential lynx reintroduction to England in 2024.

Negative oppositional statements (selected from −5's only):

1. "*Our birds and mammals are already struggling and under pressure to survive because of the way habitat has been changed by industrial farming methods. Farmers and wildlife projects are trying hard to support our current populations. Bird life is especially hard hit. I feel the Lynx as a predator is a step too far. Domestic cats are enough of a threat to bird life on top of habitat loss.*"
2. "*There are many farm animals in my area which would be under threat*"
3. "*There's a reason they're extinct. Livestock would end up being hunted by them. They aren't going to select say deer just because we want them to.*"
4. "*I have dogs and enjoy walking and natural history photography*"

Neutral statements (selected from 0's only):

5. "*I do not know enough to give a full answer.*"
6. "*I don't know enough about the topic to have a strong opinion.*"

7. "*Don't know enough about the consequences.*"
8. "*I don't feel there's enough information available or advertised to make an informed decision. My initial thought is that they should be reintroduced in Scotland rather than England as there is more wild territory for them to roam there.*"

Positive supporting statements (selected from +5's only):

9. "*Their reintroduction will create a more natural balance in the animal world around deer and rodents, which they hunt.*"
10. "*To disperse Roe Deer so that their density does not damage efforts to recreate high forest. Also to balance predators such as Red Fox which have a damaging effect on other native species e.g., Curlew and Capercaillie.*"
11. "*I believe that we shouldn't interfere with the ecosystem and that we should rewild.*"
12. "*Bringing back the lynx is righting a wrong, and would also diversify trophic networks with positive consequences for ecosystem processes (predation), ecosystem services (e.g., on timber production through natural forest regrowth), and people's enjoyment of nature.*"

Respondents were asked to identify both 'what concerns' and 'what benefits' they envisaged from a potential lynx reintroduction to England. No benefits were envisaged from a lynx reintroduction by 46% (n = 11) of those negative to the proposal compared to 11% (n = 36) of those positive to the proposal. Conversely, all (100%) negative supporters raised concerns with the proposal while 39% (n = 36) of positive supporters had no concerns. The common themes raised spanned across all levels of support. Firstly, the common benefits were 'restoring ecological balance' (especially regarding predation pressure on deer, rabbit and grey squirrel) and tourism income, while the common concerns were 'livestock predation' and 'enough space'. However, towards the more positive end of the spectrum, points raised were more informed, with terms such as 'meet environmental pledges', 'reduce road accidents caused by deer', 'potential to introduce a 'landscape of fear' approach in deer', 'improved understory flora in woodlands', 'increase sapling recruitment/forest regeneration' and 'top-down pressure on meso-predators (fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, cats, *Felis catus* or *F. silvestris*, badger, *Meles meles*)' being cited, in addition to the two common themes. Example statements have been presented for those positioned at polar opposites, either −5 or +5 levels of support, and neutrally positioned respondents (Table 2).

Table 2. Typical statements provided by respondents positioned either positively or negatively and neutrally along the levels of support for a lynx reintroduction to England in 2024.

Respondents Position	Benefits	Concerns
Negatively positioned (−5 only)		
Respondent 36	"*Keep deer or rabbit populations under control. But there are also other means to do this so I don't see any other benefit.*"	"*Livestock would end up being hunted. Potential attacks on humans/children especially if there isn't enough food for them.*"
Respondent 67	"*none*"	"*Impact on farming*"
Respondent 76	"*none*"	"*We can't look after the species we have so why introduce new ones, especially a carnivore. Yes, they eat mainly roe deer in Europe but if there is a sheep standing there it will just help itself. The sheep have no idea about these potential predators. Then farmers will want to take action to remove the lynx and may well do it illegally.*"
Respondent 82	"*none*"	"*Problems for livestock farming and for pet safety.*"

Table 2. *Cont.*

Respondents Position	Benefits	Concerns
Neutrally positioned (0 only)		
Respondent 5	*"none"*	*"potential threat to us if not other animals"*
Respondent 9	*"I think that deer populations would finally have natural form of control through predation, and therefore ecosystems would be restored"*	*"the complications/conflict with farmers and livestock and the lynx "*
Respondent 20	*"Reduction in deer population "*	*"none"*
Respondent 31	*"unsure"*	*"unsure"*
Positively positioned (+5 only)		
Respondent 12	*"More people will know about the 'Eurasian lynx'"*	*"none"*
Respondent 13	*"It would help control the deer population and that would in turn help the number of road accidents caused by deer running into the roads"*	*"none"*
Respondent 16	*"the re-introduction could boost ecotourism and add to the country's efforts to meet environmental pledges"*	*"That they would predate livestock, particularly sheep. However, I believe studies have been done in other countries which the species is present and have found livestock to be a minimal component of their diet compared to wild animals like deer."*
Respondent 19	*"Biodiversity richness will increase and that which is left of the depleted English countryside could recover with such a successful reintroduction."*	*"Firstly, that a breeding population will not find a foothold. More likely, anthropogenic disturbance runs rife. . . I'm concerned the reintroduction would suffer due to habitat fragmentation, the danger of cars and public outcry. Also, such as tigers in India the encroachment of Lynx into urbanised areas such as parks in London that stock fallowdeer, etc., for ornate reasons."*

Any potential boost to tourism following a lynx reintroduction was investigated via the respondents being asked to give their opinions. Firstly, they were asked how likely or unlikely they would be to visit a lynx release site in England. The majority of respondents were 'Very likely' (n = 26; 31%) to visit a release site, followed by 'Likely' (n = 18; 21%) and 'Neutral' (n = 19; 23%), while 'Unlikely' (n = 13; 15%) and 'Very unlikely' (n = 8; 10%) were the lowest scoring categories. There was a significant difference between the observed versus expected wishing to visit a lynx site (ChiSq = 10.9, df = 4, $p = 0.028$). Respondents were asked the level of their interest in seeing lynx on a scale of 1 (not interested at all) to 10 (would contact the tourist company imminently). There was little difference between those less interested in seeing lynx (levels 1–5 totaled 43 respondents, 51%) and those who were more interested (levels 6–10 totaled 41 respondents, 49%) (Figure 4). Asked about their personal safety when visiting a site with lynx in England, of the 83 respondents to the question 68% (n = 56) were 'Not concerned' while one individual was 'Very concerned' followed by 'Somewhat concerned' (n = 17, 21%) and 'Unsure' (n = 9, 11%). There was a significant difference between the levels of concern expressed (ChiSq = 86.0, df = 3, $p < 0.05$).

Of the 84 respondents, 28 (33%) left summary statements that provided further insights into and justifications for their views. A selection of the statements ranging equally across positive support and negative attitudes towards such a reintroduction have been provided as follows in Table 3.

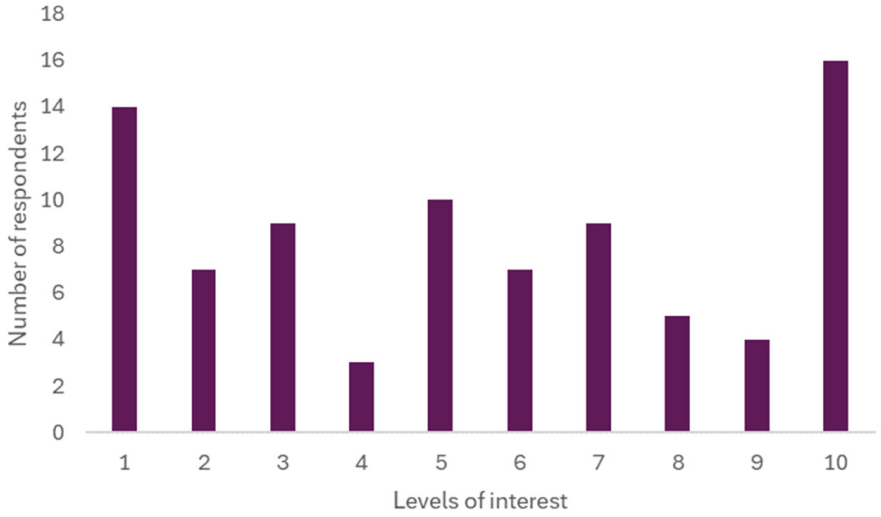

Figure 4. Presented are the respondents' level of interest in going to see lynx in England as recorded for the 84 respondents in 2024 (1 = not interested at all to 10 = would contact the company imminently).

Table 3. Summary statements from a range of positive and negative attitudes providing further insight and justification for their views regarding a lynx reintroduction to England in 2024.

Respondent No (level of support for the reintroduction)	Open statement
respondent 6 (−3)	"I would love to have them reintroduced however, feel England isn't suitable anymore, somewhere like Scotland would be better"
respondent 43 (−2)	"Anyone considering such introductions needs to be aware of the scale of the bogus scientific literature, general propaganda and real persecution from a large proportion of the shooting community (and those they influence) in the UK in relation to existing and reintroduced predator species such as badger, pine marten, eagle spp. etc."
respondent 61 (0)	"I'd like to know more about why this is being suggested"
respondent 28 (+1)	"Although I agree with the reintroduction of such a species, I do think a wilder place such as Scotland would be more ideal. England is very limited to wild places. But I would be happy to see them introduced regardless, I just worry for their survival."
respondent 78 (+3)	"The chance of seeing wild lynx in their natural habitat is very low so the question about tourism is rather academic. Any tourism would have to major on general habitat information and 'sign' that the animal leaves, e.g., pug marks, territory marks, scat, rather than raise peoples' expectation of seeing the animal. However, all such education is good. Hopefully, the project wouldn't involve bait stations (except perhaps at initial release and establishment of the animals) as this would detract from the naturalness of the whole concept."

Spearman's rho test was used to investigate the relationships between variables for all respondents as one data set. The test results (Table 4) highlighted variables that displayed significant relationships with each other. Out of the ten bi-variable relationships, six were highly significant (at the $p = 0.01$ level) while one was significant (at the $p = 0.05$ level) (Table 4).

Table 4. Spearman rho correlation coefficient matrix for a range of independent variables displaying significant relationships with one another. '*' denotes the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) while '**' denotes that the correlation is highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

		Age	Lynx Knowledge	Reintro'tion Knowledge	Level of Support	Tourism Interest
Age	Correlation Coefficient					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
	N					
Lynx knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.01				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.929				
	N	83				
Reintroduction knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.033	0.761 **			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.767	0			
	N	83	84			
Level of Support	Correlation Coefficient	−0.149	0.322 **	0.316 **		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.179	0.003	0.003		
	N	83	84	84		
Tourism interest	Correlation Coefficient	−0.224 *	0.381 **	0.354 **	0.558 **	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.042	0	0.001	0	
	N	83	84	84	84	

Perspectives by Each Societal Group

Respondents self-selected what working sector they belonged to in order to generate a range of societal groups (Table 1), with 7 sectors being developed (which included an 'Other' section). The majority were assigned to 'Other' (n = 39, 46.4%) followed by 'Education' (n = 17, 20.2%), 'Retail' (n = 13, 15.5), 'Healthcare' (n = 7, 8.3%), 'Veterinary' (3, 3.6%), 'Wildlife photography' (n = 3, 3.6%) and 'Landowner' (n = 2, 2.4%) (Table 1). The data set for the levels of support for a proposed lynx reintroduction were recalculated by societal group to identify if this highlighted any differences (Figure 5). Several groups recorded mean levels of support higher than the corresponding negative levels of support ('Retail', 'Healthcare', 'Landowner' and 'Education'), while 'Veterinary', 'Wildlife Photographer', and 'Other' recorded higher mean levels of negative support (Figure 5); however, the corresponding 'n' value was just one in these cases.

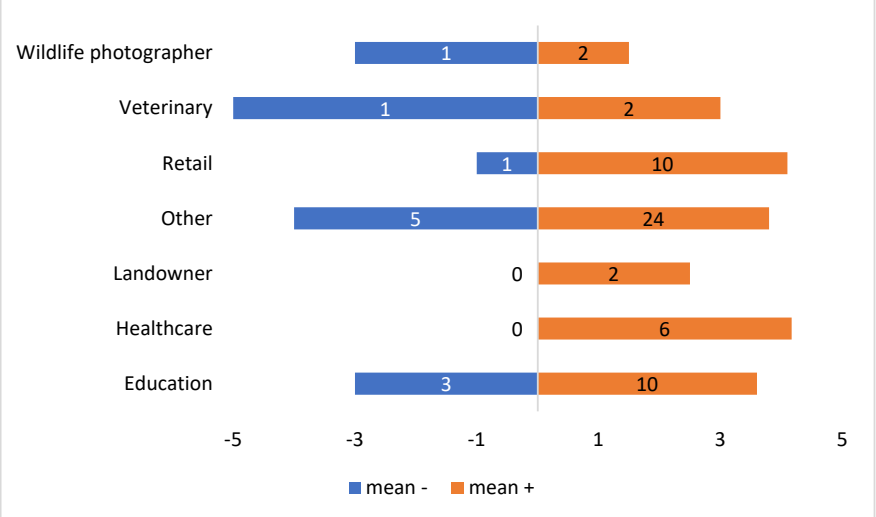

Figure 5. The mean levels of support calculated by each societal grouping showing the levels of support recorded by the 84 respondents for a potential lynx reintroduction to England in 2024 (orange bars = positive support; blue bars = negative levels of support). The numbers within the bars represent the number of data counts contributing to the mean with zeros (0) excluded.

When selecting 'Other', respondents were asked for greater detail (i.e., job title). Using these data, within the 'Other' group, there were 13 individuals (33% of the 39 'Other' respondents) identified who were working/involved within the 'environment' sector (such as ecological consultant, zoo and wildlife charity employees, conservation manager, etc.) ranging across both the UK and Europe. These individuals were removed from the 'Other' group to form a separate 'Environment' group and the data set was re-analysed (Figure 6).

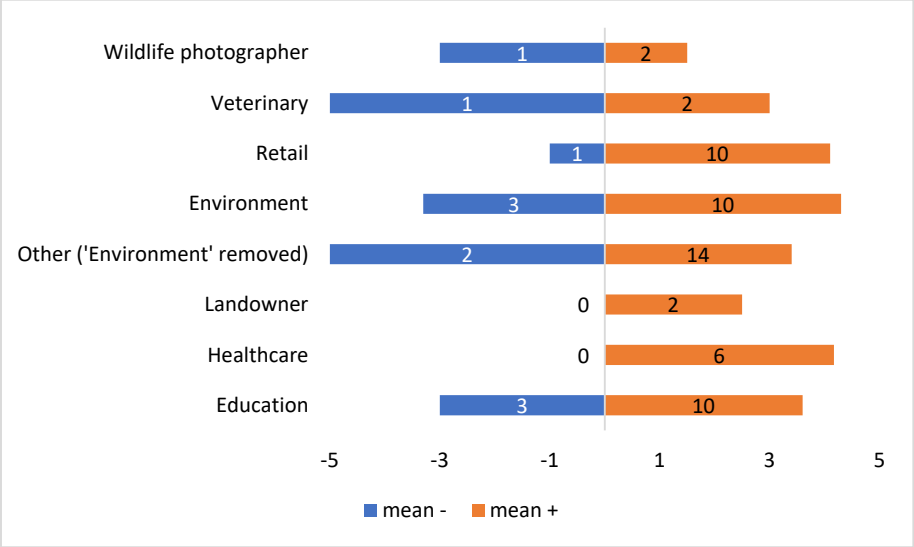

Figure 6. The mean levels of support calculated by each societal group, with the addition of the extraction of 'Environment' from the 'Other' group, showing the levels of support recorded by the 84 respondents for a potential lynx reintroduction to England in 2024 (orange bars = positive support; blue bars = negative levels of support). The numbers within the bars represent the number of data counts contributing to the mean with zeros (0) excluded.

There were significant differences in both the number of counts recorded (U = 7.5, n = 16, z = −2.52, $p < 0.05$) and the mean levels of support (U = 0, n = 16, z = −3.31, $p < 0.05$) between positive and negative support for the reintroduction (Figure 6).

Spearman's rho correlation test was used to re-analysis the relationships between variables between the new set of groups (Table 5). For some groups it was not possible to compute the correlation coefficients due to the data set being too small, such as the 'Landowner', 'Veterinary' and 'Wildlife photography' groups, and, thus, have not been presented in Table 5. In total, there were 12 highly significant (n = 7 at $p < 0.01$) and significant (n = 5 at $p < 0.05$) correlations, with all except 2 being positive relationships.

Table 6 revisits the envisaged 'Benefits' and 'Concerns' using previously unpresented respondent statements separated by the group. The levels of detail within respondents' statements varied across groups, from 'Healthcare' statements containing minimal text and the most use of "none" or "unsure" (n = 3 out of 6; 50% of statements). Over 76% of respondents were able to provide statements for both 'Benefits' and 'Concerns' with any proposed lynx reintroduction (Table 6). However, across all groups and regardless of how detailed and well-articulated the statements were, common themes remained. These themes, within the benefits of lynx being reintroduced, covered controlling deer and other species (such as fox, rabbit, grey squirrel) to restore a more natural balance within ecosystems and the potential for increased income generation via tourism. Conversely, the themes within the concerns of lynx returning were mainly livestock predation leading to farmer retaliation killing lynx, not enough space/habitat, while a small number mentioned human safety.

Table 5. Spearman rho correlation coefficient matrix was performed on each societal grouping for a range of independent variables displaying significant relationships with one another. '*' denotes the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) while '**' denotes that the correlation is highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Societal Grouping	Variables		Age	Lynx Knowl'ge	Reintro'n Knowl'ge	Level of Support	Tourism Interest
Education HD group	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1				
		Sig. (2-tailed)					
		N	17				
	Lynx knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	0.297	1			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.248				
		N	17	17			
	Reintroduction knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	0.09	0.798 **	1		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.732	0			
		N	17	17	17		
	Level of support	Correlation Coefficient	0.119	0.364	0.107	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.649	0.151	0.683		
		N	17	17	17	17	
	Tourism interest	Correlation Coefficient	−0.141	0.546 *	0.424	0.447	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.589	0.023	0.089	0.072	
		N	17	17	17	17	17
Healthcare HD group	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1				
		Sig. (2-tailed)					
		N	7				
	Lynx knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.06	1			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.898				
		N	7	7			
	Reintroduction knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	0.189	0.407	1		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.685	0.365			
		N	7	7	7		
	Level of support	Correlation Coefficient	0.491	0.125	0.686	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.263	0.789	0.089		
		N	7	7	7	7	
	Tourism interest	Correlation Coefficient	−0.545	−0.392	0.198	0.179	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.205	0.384	0.67	0.7	
		N	7	7	7	7	7

Table 5. *Cont.*

Societal Grouping	Variables		Age	Lynx Knowl'ge	Reintro'n Knowl'ge	Level of Support	Tourism Interest
Retail HD group	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1				
		Sig. (2-tailed)					
		N	13				
	Lynx knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	0.557 *	1			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.048				
		N	13	13			
	Reintroduction knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	0.19	0.397	1		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.533	0.18			
		N	13	13	13		
	Level of support	Correlation Coefficient	0.611 *	0.566 *	0.405	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.027	0.044	0.17		
		N	13	13	13	13	
	Tourism interest	Correlation Coefficient	0.461	0.29	0.648 *	0.351	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.113	0.336	0.017	0.239	
		N	13	13	13	13	13
Environment HD group	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1				
		Sig. (2-tailed)					
		N	12				
	Lynx knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.143	1			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.657				
		N	12	13			
	Reintroduction knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.022	0.489	1		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.945	0.09			
		N	12	13	13		
	Level of support	Correlation Coefficient	−0.232	0.325	0.315	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.468	0.278	0.294		
		N	12	13	13	13	
	Tourism interest	Correlation Coefficient	−0.392	0.409	0.485	0.703 **	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.208	0.165	0.093	0.007	
		N	12	13	13	13	13

Table 5. *Cont.*

Societal Grouping	Variables		Age	Lynx Knowl'ge	Reintro'n Knowl'ge	Level of Support	Tourism Interest
Other HD group (exc. 'Env't')	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1				
		Sig. (2-tailed)					
		N	26				
	Lynx knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.263	1			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.195				
		N	26	26			
	Reintroduction knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	−0.034	0.608 **	1		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.867	0.001			
		N	26	26	26		
	Level of support	Correlation Coefficient	−0.461 *	0.358	0.368	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.018	0.072	0.065		
		N	26	26	26	26	
	Tourism interest	Correlation Coefficient	−0.430 *	0.551 **	0.328	0.851 **	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.028	0.004	0.102	0	
		N	26	26	26	26	26

Table 6. Three typical statements (where possible) from within each group (either positive, negative, or neutral) spanning the levels of support for a lynx reintroduction to England in 2024.

Respondents Group (Position Level)	Benefits	Concerns
Education		
respondent 38 (+4)	*"Richer environment with more diversity of native species."*	*"If not managed properly could predate on livestock adding to the stress of already struggling farmers."*
respondent 59 (0)	*"They would control the deer and fox population. Could help boost rural economies."*	*"They may kill farmers livestock."*
respondent 5 (−3)	*"They can help more naturally manage deer populations (and other species), will bring more people to the areas where they are resulting in them spending money (ecotourism)."*	*"Not enough habitat for them, farmers shooting them if they go on their properties."*
Healthcare		
respondent 68 (+4)	*"Could help keep the deer population down."*	*"being hunted"*
respondent 63 (+3)	*"Greater biodiversity"*	*"none"*
respondent 44 (0)	*"Unsure"*	*"none"*

Table 6. *Cont.*

Respondents Group (Position Level)	Benefits	Concerns
Landowner		
Respondent 67 (1)	*"Reintroducing a natural predator"*	*"Interaction with humans"*
respondent 9 (4)	*"The reintroduction of a keystone species could restore balance, and would help manage deer populations."*	*"Public safety, livestock safety"*
Environment		
respondent 83 (+4)	*" Deer numbers and other wildlife become more balanced."*	*" Illegal hunting, public pressure, and over tourism."*
respondent 29 (+2)	*" Reduction in grey squirrel and rabbits. More land protection."*	*" People disturbing them. Landowners/farmers persecuting them. Predation on more vulnerable birds and mammals."*
respondent 82 (−3)	*" Possible deer numbers control."*	*" Problems for farmers re their animals."*
Other (excluding 'Environment')		
respondent 46 (+4)	*"Returning balance to the ecosystem and biodiversity is paramount to the climate change challenges. It would also help boost ecotourism as well as help return the habitat to it's natural state."*	*"Landowners, gamekeepers and farmers treating them the same way they treat birds of prey."*
respondent 60 (0)	*"A natural predator of animals that cause problems in their environment due to over population."*	*"Attacks on humans."*
respondent 81 (−5)	*"none"*	*"Problems for livestock farming and for pet safety."*
Retail		
respondent 2 (+3)	*"Could maintain a species population and stop overgrowth of certain species"*	*"Could impact an environmental hierarchy and potentially lead to near extinction of potential prey, or lead to more issues for farmers so they have to protect livestock more like chickens. Costing British farmers more which was previously non-existent."*
respondent 4 (0)	*"none"*	*"Potential threat to us if not other animals"*
respondent 7 (−1)	*"Bringing back the Eurasian lynx could help to restore certain aspects of nature as the lynx could recreate the required conditions."*	*"Reintroducing the Eurasian lynx could result in a breakdown of existing food chains as well as the potential of the lynx becoming invasive to existing species."*
Veterinary		
respondent 31 (+3)	*"Deer population control. Actual wildlife in the UK"*	*"Pet/livestock issues"*
respondent 35 (−5)	*"Keep deer or rabbit populations under control. But there are also other means to do this, so I don't see any other benefit."*	*"Livestock would end up being hunted."*

Table 6. *Cont.*

Respondents Group (Position Level)	Benefits	Concerns
Wildlife photographer		
respondent 58 (+2)	*"Lynx could, in the right situation, provide a much needed predator for roe deer as none exist."*	*"Our forests are small, in comparison with forests lynx live in Europe. Almost all of our forests are disturbed by humans, both by recreational use and forest management. Thousands of hectares have been clear felled due to APHA felling orders due to the latch die back disease, so the unbroken forest is smaller than ever."*
respondent 77 (−3)	*"not sure"*	*"To close to farming communities"*

4. Discussion

This study has collected and presented opinions from a range of ages, locations, and employment types to garner a cross-society perspective that will inform any future proposed lynx reintroduction to England. Establishing existing knowledge baselines form the logical starting point and, while no significant differences were recorded between the publics' knowledge of lynx and reintroduction, there were general contrasting trends. For example, people self-proclaimed a greater subject knowledge of 'reintroduction' than 'lynx' as a species (Figure 2). Text descriptors further supported this suggestion, with 73% of respondents using 'cat' to describe lynx but just 18% used more technical terminology (e.g., 13% used 'predator'; 5% used 'apex'). Conversely, there were several phrases used to capture the essence of a reintroduction, such as 'bringing back' and similar terms (43%), 'releasing' (10%) a 'native' (14%) species that was 'previously' (25%) there. These data highlight an existing knowledge gap within society about the basic understanding of lynx among the majority of respondents. Such a knowledge gap permits the more vociferous and emotive opinions to dominate discussions, similar to experiences reported in other studies [21]. Furthermore, to ensure a successful reintroduction and both identify and mitigate potential negative interactions between humans and lynx, it is imperative to address such knowledge gaps. Hence, educational initiatives could be conducted first to increase public knowledge on the behaviour, including foraging and prey types, and the ecological role lynx play within the environment. By enhancing the public's understanding, it would likely increase community support and allow better preparation for any proposed lynx reintroduction to England.

Overall, there was a much greater level of positive support for lynx being returned to England (Figure 3). However, supporting statements highlighted the two sides of predation being used within the narratives of both negative and positive supporters. Negative support statements highlighted the top-down pressure causing problems for farmers, via livestock predation, and conservationists, via predation of existing species of conservation interest, and even potential human harm. These negative statements align closely with those reported in the Macedonia-based study [21]. Conversely, positive supporters cited the benefits lynx predation could offer by restoring balance within English ecosystems, such as controlling deer populations, with benefits both for the forestry sector and a reduction in road traffic collisions with deer. Benefits for conservation, via predation on species such as red fox, that predate conservation interest species, were cited and morally the right thing having caused its initial extirpation. It is worth highlighting how non-supporters appeared more passionate/'vocal' in their opposition, expressing their views more extensively than positive supporters to such a project. Thus, this 'more vociferous' and enthusiastically

delivered opposition could currently hold greater influence in the discourse surrounding the reintroduction of the lynx to England. Furthermore, within certain societal groups, such as veterinary, one might expect the group to have accurate knowledge on the lynx; however, it was observed to be lacking (Table 6). This, again, suggests individuals were often guided more by emotion or general opinion rather than a position of factual understanding, which matters greatly, as such individuals would likely be invited to give statements in any reintroduction consultation conducted by the relevant regulatory authority and their opinion would be held in high regard as 'neutrals'. Conversely, one might expect a landowner in England to oppose such a reintroduction due to potential livestock issues. However, albeit not an active farmer, one landowner, despite only recording a weakly positive support for such a project and stating that "interactions with humans" was a concern, they also stated "...[they] would be happy to have [a lynx reintroduction project] on my land" (Respondent 67). These two cases highlight the levels of complexity involved with any societal engagement, supporting other studies findings [28,39] and the problem with coarse scale categorisations [37].

Tourism has also been cited as a potential societal benefit to follow any proposed lynx reintroduction [42,43]. Any resulting increased financial generation, following a reintroduction, could be proposed to both help financially offset any negative impacts incurred by farmers, either through a livestock loss compensation scheme or direct income generation activities, but also providing income generation benefits to the wider communities from tourist visitation. Certainly, there was much interest in seeing lynx, with 52% of respondents 'very likely'/'likely' to visit a release site as a tourist and just one person 'very concerned' about their personal safety when visiting a lynx release site area. The findings presented here draw parallels to that reported from the Harz Mountains study [42], where lynx could be leveraged as a promotional tool to attract visitors. Therefore, potentially boosting local economies by increasing tourism-related revenue and creating new business opportunities within the area. Potential increased revenue generation could form a persuasive argument to help address concerns of negative supporters, both directly as funding to compensate farmers or to fund educational activities aimed at increasing public knowledge and awareness. Reviewing the relationships between variables (Table 4) highlighted tourism's highly significant positive relationships with both lynx and reintroduction knowledge as well as level of support for such a project. However, there was a significantly negative relationship with 'age', indicating that older individuals were less likely to support the idea of tourism being possible following such a project and, therefore, not seeing any potential benefits from lynx on tourism. One should acknowledge that, for some social groups like veterinary, the data set was limited and variability was high, thus affecting the results presented here, which would need improving in future studies.

Advantages were observed when reviewing data across the societal groups. For example, data on the levels of support across the groups clearly display the groups that need to be targeted for educational programmes. These include veterinary and wildlife photography groups, for example (Table 6). Also highlighted was how the mean levels of support had been highly impacted by single high scores where 'n' values were small, such as the negative value scores for 'Veterinary' and 'Other' groups when 'environment' was removed. Underpinning the 'Veterinary' group negative value was one −5 score with the Cumbrian-based individual stating that the lynx was extirpated because of their predation threat to livestock and, potentially, humans, especially children. Similarly, the two −5 scores underpinning the 'Other' (without 'environment') group were older individuals (76 and 62 yrs old respectfully), with one viewing the lynx as curtailing them from carrying out their leisure activities (walking and photography) and the safety of their pets from predation by lynx. Similarly, the second individual considered the lynx a larger version of the domestic

cat and, therefore, was mainly concerned it would have a proportionally greater impact on wild bird populations. This echoes the earlier call for educational activities to target and allay such misinformed fears. Conversely, highly supportive groups were identifiable, such as 'Retail', 'Healthcare' and 'Environment', which the former two groups might surprise people but could, therefore, make good allies for public engagement activities (Table 6) to help overcome social complexities and mistrust [3,5,6].

Within each societal group relationships between variables varied greatly, highlighting differences between groups (Table 5) that may have been overlooked when data were treated as one data set (Table 4). For example, the 'Healthcare' group did not record a single significant relationship between variables while the 'Other' group recorded 5 significant, three highly significant ($p = 0.01$ level), and two significant ($p = 0.05$ level) relationships. These included three significant relationships that were related to tourism; firstly, with lynx knowledge, secondly, a positive level of support, and, thirdly, a negative relationship with age. The two other relationships recorded within the 'Other' group were lynx knowledge with reintroduction knowledge (highly significant) plus age with level of support (negative, significant) (Table 5). Within the 'Other' group, age recorded all negative relationships with all other variables, whether significant or not. This possibly highlighted generational opposing differences between older and younger age groups in their attitudes to either lynx reintroduction or regarding the wider conservation aims of society. Only the 'Environment' group recorded a positive, highly significant, relationship between 'level of support' with 'tourism interest' possibly indicating that this group could envisage many positive benefits following a lynx reintroduction.

The array of differences presented between and within societal groups strongly echoes previous studies findings [28]. Furthermore, there was clear evidence that misinformation and myth figure strongly within some societal groups more than others, which influences and biases perceptions greatly, as reported in other studies [21]. However, the study has also presented evidence for generational differences in attitudes towards the reintroduction of contested species, such as lynx. Whether lynx was an apex predator generating a landscape fear scenario within ecosystems remains questionable [46]; however, it would provide some degree of a 'natural' balance within ecosystems. Potential landowner, farmer, and community income generation benefits would appear to be highly possible, given the levels of interest shown in visiting such a site, which would require both management of expectation and human footprint impacts on the ecosystem. Where these factors were well considered and managed, it would appear the UK government would be able to use this species' reintroduction to help meet its international commitments.

5. Conclusions

This study found there was mostly positive support across society for the reintroduction of lynx to England. A highlight of the study was that 'farmers', contrary to general perception, were not homogenously opposed to a lynx reintroduction, with some openly positive towards the idea. Much of the negative opposition provided in statements within this study appears founded on misinformation, such as the level of danger lynx present [21]. This was particularly concerning to see in the veterinary group, as these would probably be considered an independent group by government agencies, and whose opinions and considerations would likely be weighted highly in any consultation. Hence, the study identifies areas for action, such as educational activities targeted at specific groups within society, that need conducting prior to any proposal going forward.

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preparation, A.I.C. and M.P.; writing—review and editing, A.I.C.; visualisation, A.I.C. and M.P.; supervision, A.I.C.; project administration, M.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
EFRA	The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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