



ARG UK Advice Note 6 Using the Media to Help Amphibians and Reptiles

December 2010

The media has an important role to play in guiding public perception of amphibians and reptiles. As Amphibian and Reptile Group members, you can play a key role in shaping perceptions locally, and raise the profile of your ARG in the process...

1. Choosing What to Publicise

Depending on the capacity of your ARG this could include:

- Advertising an upcoming event
- A call for new member/volunteers
- Promoting national campaigns locally (chytrid-swabbing, Toads on Roads, NARRS)
- Publicising the value of ARG action (new ponds built, toad rescues etc.)

2. Writing Your Press Release

Keep it clear Remember that your audience will, in many cases, have little or no knowledge of amphibians and reptiles. So be clear, concise and try to stick to one simple message throughout.

Quotes It is a good idea to put a quote (or two) from an ARG member in your press release. Quotes are a good way to inject some 'personality' into a press release. Quotes can also be useful for getting across your viewpoint ("Amphibians are important because...") to support the factual statements in the press release.

The first line Summarise the whole message of the press release in the first paragraph. This will quickly get your message across.

The last line This is your last chance to ensure your message is heard. If your press release is encouraging members of the public to act (e.g. attend an event, dig a pond) then this sentence should give them the instruction. (e.g. 'To get involved...').

Photographs/contacts Don't forget to add this section at the bottom so that you can be contacted if needed.

Notes A section comprising notes can be useful for giving additional reference information. 'Top five' type lists (e.g. 'five things you never knew about frogs') are particularly attractive to many journalists who will use them as an additional column.

3. Getting Your Release Out

Pitching your release Think about local radio stations, newspapers, magazines and television. All of them might be useful in spreading your message. Contact details (particularly email/phone) can be found fairly easily online.

A follow-up call can be useful to ensure that your press release has been received.

Post-release – radio interviews Before the interview list three key points that you want to say (e.g. how people can attend, where to meet, your ARG's name etc). Bring the conversation back to your agenda if it strays. Be prepared also to answer the question: "Why does [insert herp/activity] matter?"

Post-release – TV interviews If you want TV coverage remember that you will need a site to film (e.g. a local pond etc.) – ensure you have permission from site-owners before embarking down this route. To make your story attractive to regional TV news tell them what you can guarantee (e.g. a live frog, a pond, muddy volunteers etc.).

Monitoring your coverage check papers and sign up to Google News Alerts www.google.co.uk/news – emails can inform you when news stories featuring key words ("ARG", "frogs", "Northamptonshire") are published. Feed your coverage back to your ARG, and ARG UK.

4. Putting Together a Simple Press Release for Your ARG

A PRESS RELEASE: THE BARE BONES

Press release – for immediate release [this can be released under embargo if you are promoting an event that is upcoming (e.g. ‘Not for release before 01.01.10’).

TITLE: [keep it light and catchy]

PARAGRAPH 1 [First small paragraph is one or two simple sentences summarising the overall message of the release]

PARAGRAPH 2 [Second paragraph justifying why this is important news (does it have regional significance? First of its kind? Part of national efforts to...?)]

PARAGRAPH 3 [QUOTE – reiterate above point, injecting your own passion. Punchy sound-bites work well.]

PARAGRAPH 4 [Larger main paragraph on what’s happening...]

PARAGRAPH 5 [QUOTE – the important message: “We want people to...”]

PARAGRAPH 6 [Final paragraph: what must people do to act? Where next? (e.g. where is the event taking place? Where can people find out more?)]

ENDS

Contact

Your name, ARG name: youremail@address.org; phone number (plus mobile). Free photos available on request [optional].

NOTES

1. Bullet points about your ARG (and your project/event)

[Insert reference information about your ARG (how long has it been going? what does it do? How many members?).]

2. Facts about [Insert bullet points on anything relevant to the overall message: ponds, specific animals, sites, volunteering].

3. Optional top three [e.g. top three animals that the event/project will save, most threatened amphibians/reptiles in the area, biggest toad population etc.].

Additional tips

- Keep the main body of the press release to less than one side of A4, double-spaced.
- Use short, self-contained paragraphs because editors sometimes switch them around.
- Send the press release as plain text in the body of an email – do not add attachments. News desks delete emails with attachments as an anti-virus, security measure.

5. Example of a Simple ARG Press Release.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Volunteers step up to save local toads at [insert site name]

Local toads are to be helped across a busy road at [insert site name], as part of a national campaign to help save the Common Toad from disappearing in the region.

Local experts from [insert ARG] are gearing up to visit the site over the next [week/days] to carry the toads over the busy road to help them as they move towards their breeding ponds, following the recent run of milder spring weather.

“In our region, amphibians are thought to be disappearing due to loss of ponds and other habitat. Traffic can be a further nail in the coffin for some of these toad populations so [insert ARG] is asking for volunteers to help us this spring, now that the toads are moving” said [insert ARG member name].

The Common Toad – a charismatic amphibian with warty skin and waddling gait – is thought to be experiencing declines in the UK, in some cases caused by the effect of road traffic as toads travel slowly back to breeding ponds and get run over.

[Insert ARG] is one of the national network of volunteer groups concerned with amphibian and reptile conservation. Over the coming weeks, hundreds of volunteers will be gearing up to help toads across the UK’s roads, in a coordinated effort to help save this charming animal from further declines.

“We’re hoping that interested members of the public will come forward to help out.” said [ARG member].

To volunteer your services for local amphibians call [ARG member] on [insert contact details].

ENDS

Editor’s Notes [could include]

- 1. Your contact details** (include mobile).
- 2. Information about images** (e.g. ‘For images please email...)
- 3. Details of your ARG:** how many members, how long have you been going, website etc.
- 4. Facts about Common Toads:** distribution, identification, likes and dislikes etc.
- 5. Why amphibians and reptiles are disappearing...**
- 6. Why amphibians and reptiles matter...**
- 7. Website links for further information (e.g. ARG’s website or ARC)**

6. Dealing With Negative Publicity

ADDER BITE—local person/pet bitten

If an adder bite occurs locally it may be that your ARG can offer a rational expert voice on the subject, allaying fears and giving out responsible advice.

- Commiserate with the victim and never downplay their injury.
- Inform people of the risk, responsibly highlighting that adders bites do occur but that deaths are extremely rare.
- Offer practical advice on how to reduce the likelihood of this happening again – keep dogs on leads, wear suitable footwear and stick to paths.
- Ensure you underline that adders are a threatened species and have legal protection in the UK.
- Highlight that most encounters with snakes are either grass snakes or slow-worms. Cover identification concisely – many people believe adders have a yellow collar, and are unnecessarily concerned about grass snakes.
- Try to instil a sense of wonder that local areas can be home to such rare and unusual species – many people are unaware that many snakes are widespread.

“Why should we conserve snakes/lizards/newts/frogs/toads?”

You may be asked why herps are important and why we should protect them. This often comes up in stories where there is some conflict between what a particular sector wants, and what is best for the herps. Here are some possible responses:

- As with all wildlife, herps are intrinsically important.
- A local feature? Species X has been known at Site Y for decades.
- They have decreased in number, largely because of human activity.
- They have been around for millions of years (longer than us!)
- Herps play an important role in our ecosystems (e.g. food for some species such as birds, and prey on other species such as insects).
- They are interesting to many people.
- They have cultural and historical values e.g. Toad of Toad Hall, Kermit the Frog, Jeremy Fisher.
- Herps are very accessible and looking for/at them is an ideal way for people to develop an interest in nature (e.g. frogs in garden, park and school ponds)
- Most species have some legal protection and/or are listed in the national Biodiversity Action Plan.

Protected species and development: *“Newts/reptiles are more important than people/jobs/hospitals/etc!”*

Developments are sometimes proposed for areas supporting protected species. The media often latches on to claims by developers, councils or local interest groups that a particular development has been jeopardised, delayed, or made more costly because of herps (though of course it can happen with other protected species). ARGs can help by commenting on how these situations arise, and giving some much needed balance about the importance of wildlife protection. Here are some ideas to consider in your response:

- Highlight the value that amphibians/reptiles bring to the UK
- Most species are much less common than they once were, and this is partly because of development destroying their habitats.
- Some species are legally protected, so developers must take them into account.
- Site X supports the last/biggest/one of a few/etc populations of species Y.
- Well planned, early surveys can avoid problems such as delays and costly mitigation. Most problems arise when there is no survey, or if it is done late. Early surveys can allow time to find alternative sites.
- Well planned mitigation can provide good habitat for herps, while allowing development to proceed.

7. Writing Letters to Newspapers and Magazines

Letters can be a useful way to express 'the ARG viewpoint' on a given situation or issue in your area. Though undoubtedly fewer people will read these pages, they may stand a chance of being read by, or forwarded to, the people you are trying to influence. Letter writing can be a useful political tool for your ARG.

Letters can also be useful for responding to news coverage that might misrepresent herps locally (particularly surrounding negative issues like some developments or adder bites). Again the value to the public is vastly reduced compared to other forms of media work, but letter-writing can be a useful way to influence journalists directly, lessening the likelihood of the same story turning up again.

nigh at a stationary target.

Foxes and squirrels may figure frequently, but what about the adder? Anyone walking up grouse on a hot August day, and particularly if wearing a kilt, will shoot one of these for obvious reasons. In the past a keeper who shot them on his rounds reported that a viper's stomach might contain two or three grouse chicks at the appropriate time of year.

Some entries in the "Various" column are downright confusing. Is a cuckoo a genuine (and illegally shot) cuckoo, or is it local shoot jargon for an out-of-season pheasant? Almost certainly the latter.

Above Feature article in *Sporting Gun* referring to the shooting of adders. (August 2003)

Forked-tongued feature!

I WOULD like to reply to Anthony Baker's recent feature; 'Various & Hilarious.'

As a herpetologist with a strong interest in our native species and a rough shooter, I find articles like this distasteful, especially when we tread a very fine line with the 'antis'. So-called articles on a 'jokey' theme about killing a protected species have no place in this magazine. Adders are not legitimate quarry. They are protected by The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and it is an offence to intentionally kill or injure one.

Quite what does Anthony Baker mean by: 'particularly if wearing a kilt, will shoot one of these for obvious reasons.' Does he think they leap up from the ground to strike.'

The persecution of adders has contributed to their decline, a persecution fuelled by folklore and tales bigger than the snakes. Bites from this snake are extremely rare. You are statistically more likely to be killed by a dog or by a horse riding accident. I suggest Anthony Baker learns more about the nature in the countryside around him and stops perpetuating ignorant scare stories.

Adders are a necessary part of Britain's biodiversity, feeding primarily on voles, rodents and lizards. I live and work in the countryside and have never witnessed or had proof of game birds, their young or eggs being caught and killed by an adder.

The whole tone of this article was flippant and out of keeping with the standards of writing your readership has come to expect.

Nigel Hand, Ledbury, Herefordshire

Right Response by Nigel Hand to article in *Sporting Gun* (September 2003).

This note is based on a workshop run by Jules Howard (Froglife) and Jim Foster (Natural England) at the Herpetofauna Worker's Meeting, Blackpool, February 2009. Thank you to all participants for their suggestions.

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ARG UK

Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK
VOLUNTEERS WORKING FOR THE CONSERVATION OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

ARG UK is the network of volunteer conservation groups, concerned with the native amphibians and reptiles of the UK and supported by Amphibian and Reptile Conservation.

**amphibian and reptile
conservation**

