

## Young people's attitudes to lynx and wolf reintroductions

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An increasing number of studies indicate that parts of the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of Ireland are currently, or may be in the future, ecologically suitable for Eurasian lynx, and to a lesser extent, grey wolf reintroductions (Hanson, 2025). However, the social feasibility of reintroducing large carnivores like these is more complex and less studied than the ecological aspects, including its political, cultural, economic and psychological dimensions. Debates about the species' potential return have not featured in formal policy documents in Northern Ireland (DAERA, 2024) or in the Republic of Ireland (National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2024). In Britain, however, the issue's growing relevance was underscored by three key developments in 2025.

Firstly, the illegal release of four lynx into the Scottish Highlands and the subsequent political decision by the Scottish First Minister against legal lynx reintroductions at the current time (Whitehead, 2025). Secondly, the publication of the Scottish National Lynx Discussion, detailing the diverse views of stakeholders on potential lynx reintroductions, as well as on their management and governance (IUCN SSC Conservation Specialist Planning Group, 2025). Thirdly, the release of data from northern England and southern Scotland showing that 72 per cent of those

surveyed in a proposed reintroduction area supported the return of lynx (The Missing Lynx Project, 2025).

These last results are notably higher than those of previous surveys of attitudes to both lynx and wolf reintroductions in Britain. With these, support for reintroductions varied between 36 and 52 per cent, and were also characterised by higher levels of neutrality and opposition (Hanson, 2025: 192). It is worth noting the non-representative sampling that generated the 2025 lynx survey data, and the explicit interest in lynx reintroductions by the authors, both of which the report acknowledges. No attitudinal data exists for Northern, or the Republic of, Ireland. Elsewhere, Hanson (2025: 196) theorises that attitudes to large carnivore reintroductions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland will become more supportive over time, driven, in part, by higher levels of support among younger people.

However, until now, no data on youth attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions has been published, bar passing references to it in the results from a youth survey on NatureScot's Corporate Plan 2022-26 (Gardner and Webster, 2022) and in the recommendations from the Republic of Ireland's Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (National

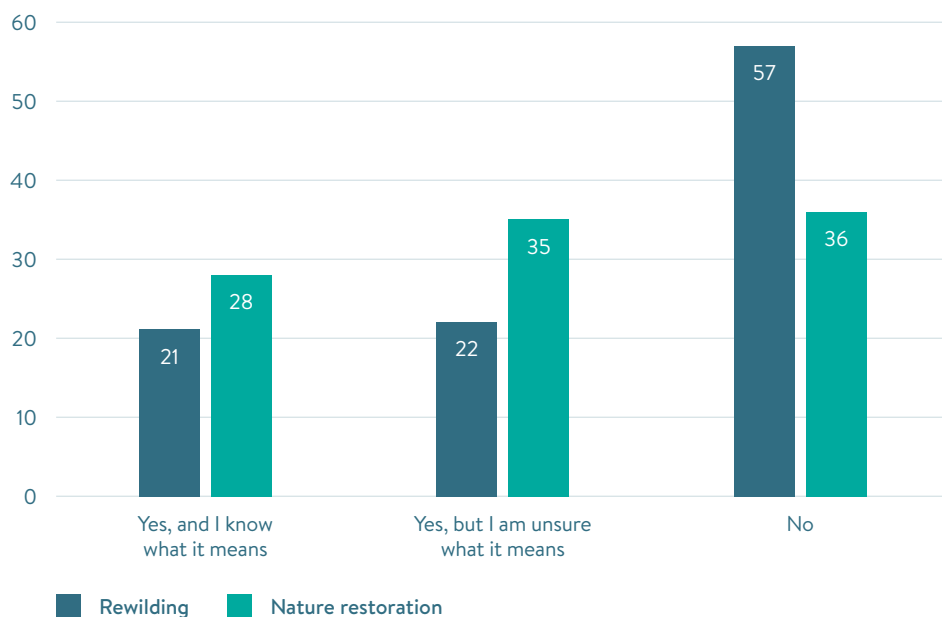
Parks and Wildlife Service, 2024). In other contexts, when young people's attitudes to lynx, wolves and their return have been considered, various factors have shaped these perspectives, including knowledge, beliefs and socio-demographics (Dieser and Bogner, 2019; Hermann and Menzel, 2013). In a study of 311 German 9-11-year-olds, respondents' views were more diverse and more negative about wolves than about lynx (Dieser and Bogner, 2019).

This Research Update presents results on young people's attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It draws on data from two surveys undertaken in Northern Ireland by ARK: 4,191 respondents to the 2025 *Kids' Life and Times* (KLT) survey of 10/11-year-olds, or Primary 7 (P7) age, and 2,129 respondents to the 2025 *Young Life and Times* (YLT) survey of 16-year-olds. 2025 YLT was a split survey meaning that 1086 participants completed the version with questions on lynx and wolf reintroductions. Northern Ireland's unique geopolitical status means that data from its population can provide relevant insights for both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. In summary, complexity characterises young people's attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions.

## Knowledge and beliefs

Questions were first asked about respondents' knowledge and beliefs. In YLT, 16-year-olds were asked if they had heard of rewilding and nature restoration. Nature restoration refers to actively repairing degraded ecosystems to recover their original functions and biodiversity, whereas rewilding can often go further by reducing human control and reintroducing missing species to allow natural processes to shape landscapes. The highest proportion of respondents had not heard of and did not know what either term meant. This was followed by those who had heard of the terms but also did not understand their meaning, followed by 16-year-olds who had heard of and understood the concepts (Figure 1). Overall, there were greater levels of awareness about nature restoration than about rewilding.

Figure 1. Awareness of rewilding and nature restoration among YLT respondents (%)



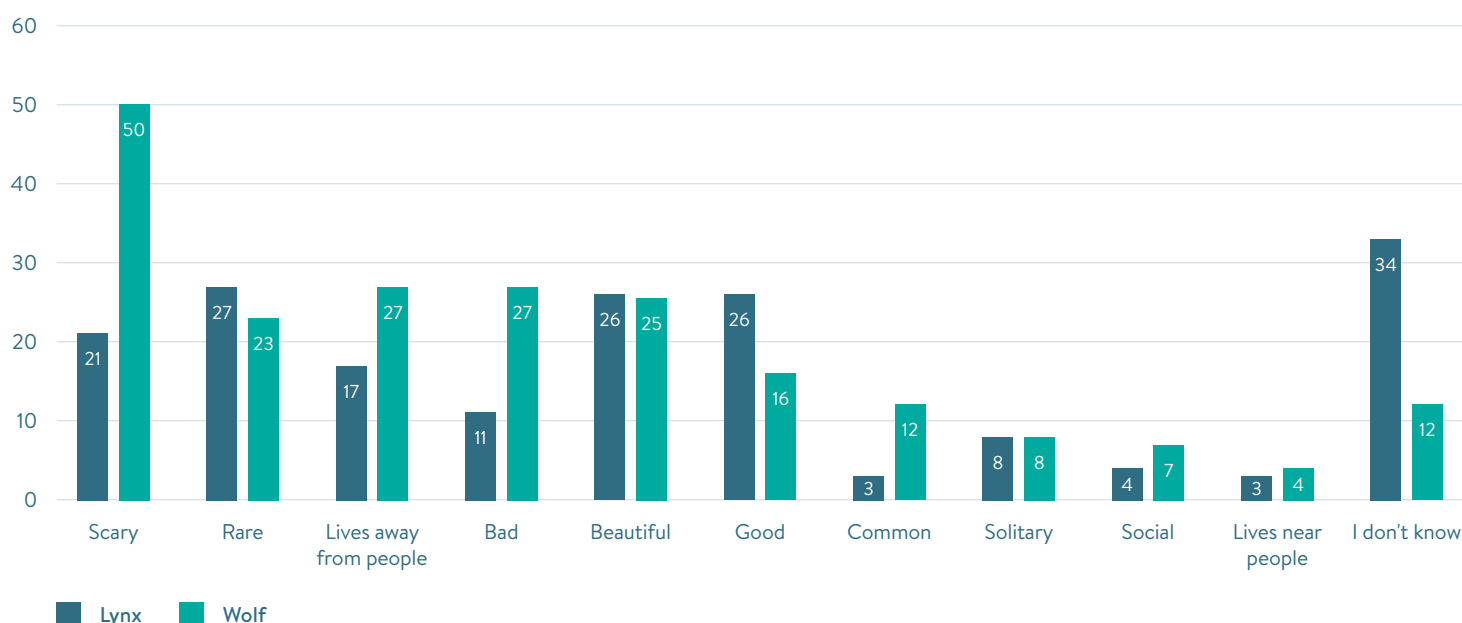
In KLT, respondents were given a short explanatory paragraph (here) about lynx and wolves and were then asked 'When you think of a lynx, which of the following come to mind?'. They could choose from 10 different words or phrases as well as 'I don't know'. This question and these same responses were then repeated for wolves. For lynx, 'I don't know' was the most common choice (34%), reflecting lower levels of knowledge about the

species among the sample. This was followed by 'rare', 'beautiful' and 'good', each of which was identified by about one quarter of respondents (Figure 2).

In contrast, there were much lower levels of unfamiliarity with wolves but also more negative beliefs. Half of respondents felt that wolves were 'scary', while around one quarter chose 'bad', 'lives away from people' and 'beautiful'. As well as the higher

degree of real and perceived risk posed to livestock and people by wolves compared to lynx, these results may also reflect common negative cultural associations with wolves, in both contemporary and historical eras. This was also noted in the German study from a similar age group (Dieser and Bogner, 2019), as was the same pattern of a wider variety of, and more negative, word associations with wolves compared to lynx.

Figure 2. Lynx and wolf word association among KLT respondents (%)



## Attitudes to reintroductions

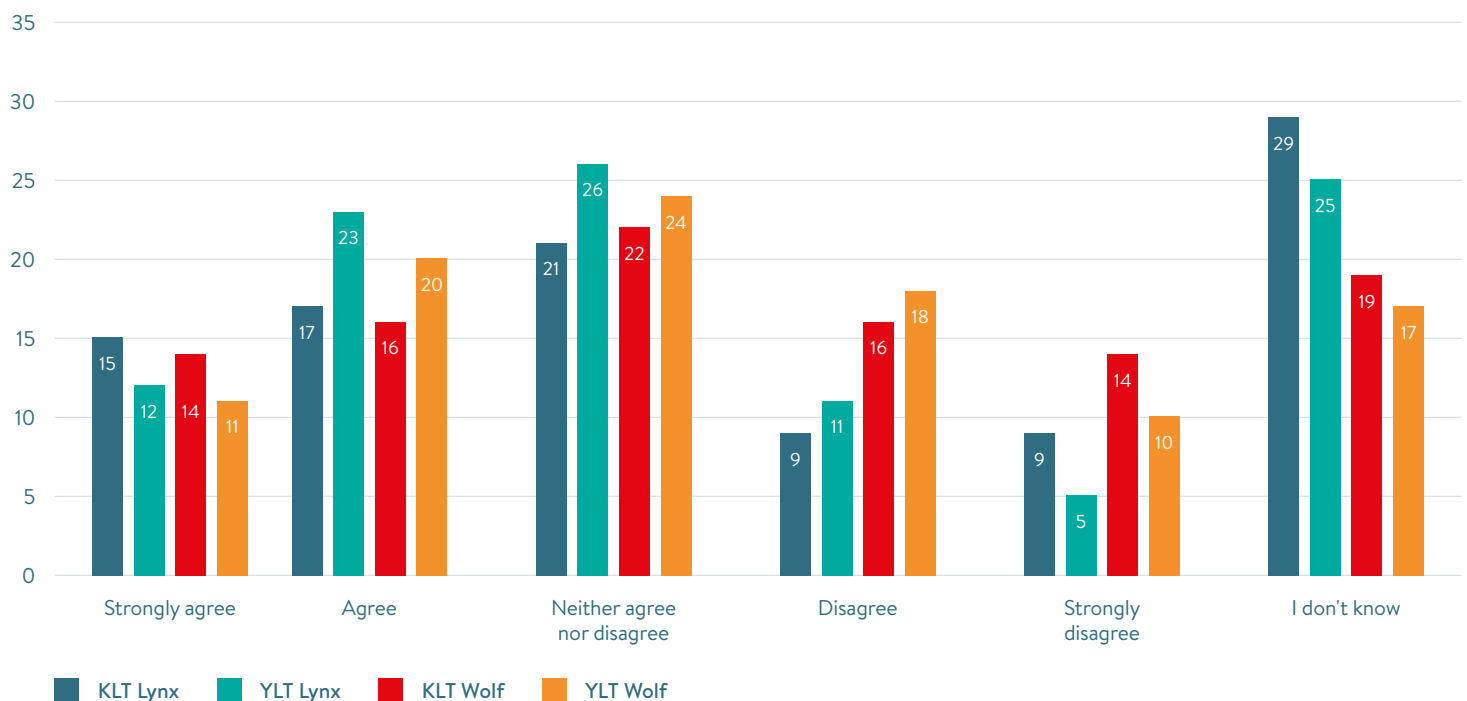
In both surveys, respondents' view on the potential reintroductions of lynx and wolves to the UK and the Republic of Ireland were solicited. In YLT, 16-year-olds were first given a short explanatory paragraph (here) about the idea in these locations, and were then asked 'How much do you agree or disagree that lynx should be reintroduced to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland?'. The same question was then repeated with wolves. In KLT, 10/11-year-olds were given

a similar short explanatory paragraph (here), though in more age-appropriate language, and were then asked 'How much do you agree or disagree that lynx should be brought back from other countries to live in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland?' This was also then repeated for wolves.

Figure 3 details the responses to these questions. For both ages and species, across the five main response categories,

'Neither agree nor disagree' was the most common response. This may indicate high levels of uncertainty among respondents about these concepts. The 'I don't know' response also scored highly. That this was notably higher for lynx than for wolves reflects greater levels of unfamiliarity with the former species compared to the latter, as the word association KLT data illustrated in the previous section.

**Figure 3. Attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland among KLT and YLT respondents (%)**



Overall, there were higher levels of support for lynx than for wolf reintroductions among both KLT and YLT respondents. Levels of 'strongly agree/agree' were slightly lower than the range of 36-52 per cent discussed by Hanson from a range of previous surveys of British adults (2025: 192), and considerably lower than the 72 per cent cited by the 2025 lynx survey (The Missing Lynx Project, 2025). This may be due to the more representative sampling in the YLT and KLT surveys, but could also be related to the younger ages or different location of respondents in this study.

## Factors associated with reintroduction attitudes

Across YLT and KLT, multiple factors were associated with respondents' attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions (Table 1). Across both species and age groups, males and urban residents were significantly more supportive. Those from less well-off households were also more supportive, though the results were not significant.

The final socio-demographic factor considered was livestock ownership at the family level. Interestingly, 10/11-year-olds whose families owned livestock were significantly more supportive of lynx and wolf reintroductions, while for 16-year-olds, this trend was reversed.

**Table 1. Factors associated with attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions in the UK and Republic of Ireland among KLT and YLT respondents**

Variable	Category	% agree/strongly agree			
		KLT		YLT	
		Lynx	Wolf	Lynx	Wolf
Gender	Male	36	34	41	36
	Female	28	25	29	28
Place lived	Urban	34	30	37	33
	Rural	32	28	30	28
Livestock ownership by family	Yes	37	34	30	29
	No	30	26	37	32
Family affluence	Low	35	32	37	42
	Medium	33	29	35	30
	High	30	28	36	32

The analysis of the KLT data found that almost all of the 11 words and phrases children associated with wolves and lynx were significantly related to the level of support for the species' reintroduction. The two exceptions were 'lives near people' with wolves and 'common' with lynx. Of these words and phrases, the largest differences in support (agree/strongly agree) for lynx reintroductions between chosen and not chosen were for 'beautiful' (53% v 25%), 'good' (51% v

25%) and 'lives near people' (49% v 32%). For wolves, the biggest gaps were in relation to 'good' (57% v 24%), 'beautiful' (50% v 22%) and 'scary' (20% v 39%).

For YLT, the relationships between attitudes to large carnivore reintroductions and knowledge of rewilding and nature restoration were considered. This was especially significant for 16-year-olds who had heard of and knew what the terms meant. Support

(agree/strongly agree) among these respondents who understood nature restoration was higher for lynx (48%) than for wolves (43%). These proportions were higher again for those who understood what rewilding was (lynx 57%; wolves 47%). This may demonstrate not only awareness of the functional ecological potential of large carnivores for these processes and goals, but also their highly symbolic status as emblems of rewilding in particular (Hanson, 2025).

## Conclusion

These results on young people's attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions are both the first attitudinal data on this topic from the island of Ireland, as well as the first from young people in the UK. They suggest that there are varying levels of knowledge about rewilding and nature restoration among YLT respondents, and about lynx and wolves among KLT respondents. However, 10/11-year-olds had more awareness and more negative beliefs about wolves than about lynx.

Similarly, across both samples, there were higher levels of support for lynx than for wolf reintroductions. However, 'don't know' responses were higher for lynx than for wolves. Furthermore, 'neither agree nor disagree' was the highest scoring of the five main categories for both species and for both age groups, potentially indicating high levels of uncertainty about these proposals. Knowledge, beliefs, gender, place lived and family livestock ownership were among the

factors significantly associated with attitudes to potential reintroductions.

In conclusion, these data suggest that complexity characterises young people's attitudes to potential lynx and wolf reintroductions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

## Key Points:

- Knowledge about rewilding and nature restoration varied considerably among 16-year-old respondents, as it did about lynx and wolves among 10/11-year-old respondents.
- 10/11-year-olds had more awareness and more negative beliefs about wolves than about lynx.
- Across both age groups, there were higher levels of support for lynx than for wolf reintroductions to the UK and the Republic of Ireland, but 'don't know' responses were higher for lynx than for wolves.
- In terms of attitudes to potential reintroductions, 'neither agree nor disagree' was the highest scoring main response category for both species and for both age groups.
- Knowledge, beliefs, gender, place lived and family livestock ownership were among the factors significantly associated with attitudes to potential large carnivore reintroductions.

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## Author

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of issues. YLT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what young people think. In total 2,129 16-year olds took part in the 2025 YLT survey. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)

The Kids' Life and Times survey is also a joint initiative between the two Northern Ireland universities, and provides an independent source of information on what children think about the issues affecting their lives. In 2025, 4,191 10/11-year-olds completed the survey in school. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/klt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt)



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