Butterfly Conservation Statement on the Defra ‘Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort.’

The new Code has been launched by Defra following public consultation and detailed discussions between representatives from equine interests and nature conservation organisations.

The Code is a guidance document that sets out how land managers can control Common Ragwort Senecio jacobaea in accordance with legal requirements but nevertheless take account of the plant’s considerable value to wildlife. Common Ragwort is acknowledged to be of great importance as a nectar source and foodplant for a host of insects and other invertebrates.

Eradication is not the objective of the Code, which recognises that Common Ragwort helps our degraded countryside maintain biodiversity and need not be controlled where it does not present a risk.

Plant defences against herbivores
The plant’s toxicity to grazing animals is a real concern and means that great care is needed to ensure grazing animals do not ingest the plant. Most animals avoid the growing plants but not when it is dried or wilted such as in hay or silage.

Allowing the plant to spread to other land, such as where it might get eaten by horses or incorporated in hay, can result in legal enforcement action by Defra as it is against the provisions of the 1959 Weeds Act. The Code helps land owners assess the likelihood of ragwort spreading from their land to places where it would present a risk to grazing animals.

A natural asset
Common Ragwort is a natural component of many types of unimproved grassland and most of these are grazed with the knowledge that the stock leave the plant alone. Therefore the managers of such sites, particularly those with nature conservation interests, usually just control the plant and do not try to eradicate it. Where there will be such a controlled persistence of ragwort, agreement and understanding with neighbours needs to be established.

A sensible approach to control measures
The Code describes various categories of land where nature conservation and other environmental considerations should influence the approaches taken to controlling ragwort.

Butterfly Conservation feels the Code encourages a balanced approach to control, giving full regard to animal welfare and the legal requirement to prevent spread to other land. The Society urges land managers to adopt a sensitive approach to
managing their ragwort, and in particular the non-agricultural land that might simply be subjected to wide-scale herbicide spraying. This would adversely affect so many plants and insects and must be avoided if road and rail verges, brownfield sites and un-worked mineral areas are to continue providing vital wildlife habitat throughout our countryside.

Notes:

1. The Ragwort Control Act 2003 covers England and Wales. The Code and its Environmental Appraisal are available from the Defra web-site at http://www.defra.gov.uk/ The Code applies to England only, a separate but essentially similar one is being applied in Wales. The Scottish Executive is being lobbied to introduce similar legislation.

2. Common Ragwort Senecio jacobaea is the most abundant and widespread of the ragworts (members of the Compositae or daisy family) occurring in British Isles and is the one listed in the 1959 Weeds Act. Other ragworts and similar looking species, some of which are uncommon or even rare and protected, are identified in a photographic guide in the Code to help prevent mistaken removal.

3. Common Ragwort is a valuable nectar source for hundreds of insects and is the foodplant of at least 77 species of insect herbivore: 27 species of moth, 22 species of thrip, 13 species of bug, 9 species of flies and 6 species of beetle. Over two thirds of these species are very reliant on the plant as their foodplant, and include seven Nationally Scarce species (three beetles, one fly and three micro-moths), and three Nationally Rare (Red Data Book) ones.

Some 30 of these invertebrate species, mainly flies, leaf beetles and micro-moths, are virtually confined to Common Ragwort as a foodplant, and this is a significant number. The most well known is the Cinnabar moth.

The Cinnabar’s striking black and yellow caterpillars are well known and liked. A batch of caterpillars will strip leaves and flower buds off ragwort plants and will feed on related species such as Hoary Ragwort and Groundsel. The caterpillars’ bright colours are the classic natural warning to birds that they contain toxins acquired from their foodplant. The moth is present throughout most of England and Wales, but in the north and into Scotland it becomes more localised and coastal in distribution. Though common it may not be as abundant as it used to be.

Caterpillars of the Sussex Emerald moth, a protected species currently restricted to a single coastal site in south-east England, also rely on Common Ragwort as their secondary foodplant.

4. Butterfly Conservation controls Common Ragwort on its reserves by hand pulling and mechanical cutting. The Code helps land managers choose the most appropriate methods for their land and points to sources of advice on minimising the environmental impacts. It also includes health and safety guidance for those controlling and disposing of Common Ragwort.
5. The attached information note from English Nature provides useful and interesting detail on the biology and other aspects of Common Ragwort.

Butterfly Conservation
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