



Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the United Kingdom
ARG UK Advice Note 2
Establishing and Maintaining an Amphibian and Reptile Group
October 2007

Background

Amphibian and Reptile Groups (ARGs)* comprise volunteers concerned with the conservation of native frogs, toads, newts, lizards and snakes. ARGs work at the local level and are organised on the basis of counties or some other convenient grouping of administrative areas. They are part of the ARG UK network, which supports groups by exchanging information and sharing ideas. If you want to help with the conservation of amphibians and reptiles but there is no group in your area, or if your local group could benefit from a re-launch, then this advice note outlines how to set up an ARG and, equally importantly, how to maintain one.

Anyone with a genuine interest in herpetofauna conservation can set up a group, provided that the geographic area in question does not already have a group in existence.

*Note that although local groups are often referred to as 'ARGs', group names have variable structures – hence 'ARGs' include 'Reptile and Amphibian Groups' and 'Teams' etc.

Getting Started

Contact ARG UK for initial advice and support (www.arguk.org).

Choose a suitable date, time and venue for an inaugural meeting.

Contact people from other organisations within your area who may be interested in amphibian and reptile conservation. Use a search engine on the internet, or your local library, to find the relevant contact details.

Useful contacts could include: The local Wildlife Trust, county museum, local biological records centre, local biodiversity officer, natural history societies and the local office of the relevant statutory conservation organisation.

Invite interested contacts to your launch meeting. Ask whether they can promote the event within their organisation. Local organisations may also be able to provide support in the form of a meeting room, audio-visual aids or other equipment.

Voluntary/Non-Governmental Organisations

- ARG UK
- ARG UK Regional Representative
- British Herpetological Society
- British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- County Wildlife Recorders
- County Wildlife Trusts
- The Herpetological Conservation Trust
- Froglife
- Natural history societies

Professional and Statutory Organisations

- County museum
- Environment Agency
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Groups
- Forest Enterprise
- Local authority (county ecologist?)
- Local biodiversity officer
- Local biological records centre
- Local offices for Countryside Council for Wales, Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage.
- Police wildlife liaison officer
- Universities or colleges

Local environmental consultancies could also be approached.

Most ARGs work in close cooperation with other local conservation groups – so contacting such bodies early on can help establish mutually beneficial working relationships. An ARG should take care not to replicate ongoing local activities, but rather should increase and enhance conservation action.

Publicise the event to the wider public. Send a press release to local papers and post details on the ARG UK website events page.

The Inaugural Meeting and First Steps

Decide on a name and positions of responsibility within the group. These can include several posts but those marked * are key:

- Chairperson and a deputy to represent the group, guide progress and deal with casework *
- Secretary to provide a contact for the group, look after membership and take minutes*
- Treasurer to administer the group's accounts *
- Recording officer to collate records and administer the ARG UK insurance scheme, licensing and health and safety documents *
- Newsletter editor
- Events manager
- Website manager
- Publicity Officer

Agree on the objectives of the ARG. Decide on some realistic targets. Examples could be undertaking a specific amphibian and/or reptile project or increasing the group's membership.

Organise a programme of events to encourage participation by ARG members and in some cases the wider public (see below).

Establish a membership scheme. A membership fee might be charged, which is one way of covering printing and postage costs, purchase of survey equipment, room hire etc.

Produce a membership leaflet and/or flyer. This should contain details of your ARG and how to join. It could also be combined with a simple recording form, to encourage people to submit records to the group/local recorder. Copies can be left with the Wildlife Trusts, local museums and public libraries and given out at public events in which the group participates.

Adopt a constitution (see appendix) in order to open a bank account.

Affiliate to ARG UK (contact the secretary) to take advantage of the free insurance scheme and the generic health and safety documents. Contact details for your ARG will be posted on the ARG UK website and the group can use the ARG UK logo on its stationary.

Do not feel discouraged if only a few people turn up to an inaugural meeting. All you need initially is a core of enthusiasts to run the group and then you can work on recruiting more members.

Tips for Running a Local Group

- Advertise a programme of events well in advance, and by a reminder nearer the day.
- Send programme details to other members of the local conservation community to promote within their organisations.
- Include training courses in your events programme. These are usually very popular and are an excellent way of recruiting new members. One possible strategy is to charge a small fee for a training event, which includes ARG membership for a year. ARG UK or The HCT can provide support for training events.
- Have regular committee meetings, shorter but more frequent being the best strategy. As your group develops ensure that the constitution is kept up to date, preferably by an annual review.
- Aim to become the local source of advice for herpetofaunal conservation issues. For example the group could be involved in verification of records contributed by the general public, or advise on habitat management for other conservation organisations and local authorities.

Activities for a local group could include:

- Recording first frog spawning dates and estimating population size by counting spawn clumps.
- Monitoring a local toad population during its annual migration.
- Providing training courses in amphibian and reptile surveying to facilitate the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme (NARRS) and local Biodiversity Action Plans.
- Blanket pond surveys in areas that have no records.
- Habitat management work.

- Field trips/guided visits to amphibian and reptile sites.
- Attending ARG UK regional meetings and the annual Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting.
- Providing illustrated talks and social events.

Maintaining an ARG

ARGs vary in size and in the activities that they undertake. No single group should feel obliged to take on all of the activities suggested above. The work of an ARG should reflect local and national conservation priorities and the interests and skills of the group's membership.

As noted in *Getting Started*, ARGs should work cooperatively with other local conservation bodies. This ensures that volunteer effort is used to the best effect and in many cases allows sharing of resources (specialised expertise, meeting venues, equipment).

A common concern among groups is that of inactive membership. This is a recurrent issue for voluntary groups. ARGs should engage members as actively as possible, but it is important to recognise the constraints to volunteer commitment. Although ARG members may be genuinely interested in amphibian and reptile conservation not all of them may necessarily have the time to translate this interest into participation in group activities. However, 'inactive' members contribute money towards running costs and equipment or special projects, through their membership or specific appeals.

The activity of most groups is often maintained by a small core of enthusiasts who can nevertheless achieve a great deal. The wider membership should be kept informed by means of a newsletter or bulletin sheet, preferably in an electronic form to save on postage and printing costs. Where membership is low, an ARG may achieve a great deal by working with other local organisations. For example, a single ARG member can have a large local impact by training members of other groups in amphibian and reptile survey techniques or habitat management.

Special Projects

Biodiversity Action Planning. ARGs are ideally placed to participate in the development of local Species Action Plans (SAPs), either as partners or lead partners. A local ARG will often have the best knowledge of the distribution and status of herpetofauna locally. An ARG can propose realistic actions within a specified timeframe. Actions could include surveying sites with records more than ten years old, restoring old ponds and creating new ones, or habitat management for reptiles such as creating hibernacula and grass snake egg laying sites.

Databases and Herpetofaunal Atlases. The recording officer should aim to keep all herpetofauna records on a database to facilitate data searches and analysis. Distribution maps can then be generated. Some ARGs have taken this a step further by publishing atlases. Examples of some excellently produced atlases are given in the *References* section.

Education. Giving talks in schools or to other groups, such as local Wildlife Trust groups and natural history societies, is useful in raising awareness of local herpetofauna. These can generate additional records and will increase the profile of the ARG in the area.

National Projects. National recording projects, such as the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme, can provide a useful focus for local survey work, and such schemes are dependent on the contribution of volunteers. The annual Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting is a good place to learn about and keep in touch with national projects.

For further help and advice on establishing an ARG please contact the Widespread Species Conservation Officer, based at The Herpetological Conservation Trust, 655A Christchurch Road, Boscombe, Bournemouth, Dorset BH1 4AP, 01202 391319.

References

- Gent, T. and Gibson, S. (eds.) (1998). *Herpetofauna Workers' Manual*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.
- Hand, N., King P. and Watson W. (2006). *Amphibians and Reptiles of Herefordshire*. Herefordshire Biological Records Centre.
- Wright, S., Osborne, J. and Pursgrove, C. (2004). *Frogs and Friends. The Distribution and Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles in Nottinghamshire*. Nottingham Natural History Museum.
- Wycherley, J. and Anstis, R. (2001). *Amphibians and Reptiles of Surrey*. Surrey Wildlife Trust, Woking.

Appendix: Generic Amphibian and Reptile Group Constitution

This constitution has been modified from the Draft Constitution for an Amphibian & Reptile Group, Appendix II, Herpetofauna Worker's Guide 2000. It is offered as a guide to the structure and content of a group constitution. Not all sections will be relevant to all local requirements. ARGs are welcome to adapt the following to suit their specific requirements and mode of operation.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The name of the Group shall be the *group name*, abbreviated to *abbreviated group name*.
- 1.2 *Group name* shall be non-party political, non-sectarian and non profit-making.
- 1.3 *Group name* shall not support nor become involved with any organisation or individual engaged in activities that are illegal under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981), the CRow Act (2000) or subsequent amendments (or are otherwise unlawful).
- 1.4 *Group name* shall operate in the *specified area/region/county* but avoid overlap with any other ARG already established in the *specified area/region/county* unless invited to do so.
- 1.5 *Group name* is affiliated to the Amphibian and Reptile Group (ARG).

2. OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 To promote the conservation of all native species of amphibian and reptile and their habitats in the *specified area/region/county*, in the British Isles and Europe.
- 2.2 To establish and monitor the distribution and status of amphibians and reptiles, including introduced species, in the *specified area/region/county*.
- 2.3 To liaise with and provide advice on amphibians and reptiles and the management of their habitats to relevant statutory and non statutory organisations and agencies and the general public.
- 2.4 To foster an interest in amphibians and reptiles and their conservation and to develop the skills of those interested in these species.

3. COMMITTEE

- 3.1 The affairs and policies of the Group shall be administered and decided by the Committee.
- 3.2 The Committee shall normally consist of not more than *ten?* members, including the officers. The committee officers shall include as a minimum a Chair, a Secretary/Treasurer, Recording Officer and at least one representative from any sub group. The Committee has the right to invite new voting members and non-voting guests from other conservation organisations who could make a valuable contribution to the ARG's objectives.
- 3.3 The Committee shall be elected yearly by ARG at the Annual General Meeting. Nominations for posts with proposers and seconders and acceptance of nominations are to be received by the ARG secretary at least ten days before the AGM.
- 3.4 No business shall be undertaken at a meeting unless *four* voting members are present when the meeting begins.
- 3.5 Any casual vacancy on The Committee may be filled by a majority vote of The Committee and confirmed at the AGM.
- 3.6 The Committee will have the right to co-opt people who can help with the objectives of the group.

4. MEMBERSHIP

- 4.1 A yearly membership fee as proposed by the committee and approved at the AGM *may/will* be charged to an individual and will be valid from *1st January-31st December*. Payment is due on *1st January* annually. Any new member joining after the end of *September* in one year will receive the following year's membership free-of-charge.
- 4.2 Only members of *group name* who have paid their current membership fee shall have voting rights.
- 4.3 An individual shall cease to be a member of *group name* if his/her conduct is considered detrimental to the group's objectives by not less than half of the committee.
- 4.4 Such members will be given two weeks notice of a meeting where the matter will be discussed and they must have a chance to give an explanation of their conduct to the committee, or the sub-group to which they belong, before a vote is taken. The explanation must be submitted in writing and must be received by the Chair at least seven full days before the meeting. Committee members may vote by proxy provided that notice of the vote is received by the Chair at least two full days before the meeting.

5. SUB-GROUPS

- 5.1 The committee may establish sub-groups geographical or particular interest to pursue *group name* objectives within their respective areas. Such sub-groups shall be responsible to the main committee for all matters set out in this constitution.
- 5.2 The main Committee shall fix sub-groups areas of operation.

6. STORAGE AND RELEASE OF DATA

- 6.1 *Group name* will not provide its members' personal details to any other organisation or company. Membership details are used solely for the administration of ARG and its activities.
- 6.2 The Committee shall decide the means of gathering and storage of data. Records shall be maintained by the Recording Officer (with any sub-recorders).
- 6.3 All data on the distribution of amphibians and reptiles shall be deemed to be the copyright of *group name*.
- 6.4 All data on the distribution of amphibians and reptiles shall be made freely available for conservation purposes unless this compromises site or species security.

7. FUNDS

- 7.1 The Committee may acquire funds for furthering the objectives of the group, so long as the aims and activities of the person or organisation providing funds does not conflict with the aims of other voluntary bodies concerned with herpetofauna conservation.

8. GROUP MEETINGS

- 8.1 Time and place of group meetings shall be determined by The Committee.
- 8.2 The group shall hold an Annual General Meeting in *month* each year at which Committee members and officers will be appointed.
- 8.3 The Committee may at any time call an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) and must do so if requested in writing by not less than ten paid up members of the group.
- 8.4 An AGM or EGM can be held at any time and place determined by The Committee. At least 14 days notice should be given to members.

9. VOTING AT MEETINGS

- 9.1 For resolutions, members must declare any interest in the matter being voted upon.
- 9.2 Members who have no declared interest shall be entitled to one vote.
- 9.3 A member with a declared interest shall be able to speak, but has no voting rights.
- 9.4 In the event of an equality of votes, the group's Chair shall have the casting vote.

10. ACCOUNTS

- 10.1 The Committee shall cause accounting records to be kept by the Treasurer.
- 10.2 Financial years shall begin 1 April.
- 10.3 Bank accounts shall be maintained in the group's name. Cheques may be signed by any two of the group's authorised signatories. There may be up to three authorised signatories.
- 10.4 Expenditure in excess of £200.00 must be given prior approval by The Committee. The account must not be overdrawn.

11. ALTERATIONS TO CONSTITUTION (Special Resolution)

- 11.1 Any alterations to this Constitution shall be proposed at the AGM or an EGM and require the approval of two-thirds of all members present with a quorum of *number* voting members.
- 11.2 Any Special Resolution for the alteration of the Constitution must come from a member of The Committee and must be received by the Secretary at least eight weeks before the meeting at which the resolution is to be brought forward.
- 11.3 The Committee members may vote by proxy provided that notice of the vote is received by the Secretary before the meeting.

12. DISSOLUTION

- 12.1 *Group name* may be dissolved by a resolution passed by a two-thirds majority of those present and voting at an EGM convened for that purpose.
- 12.2 Any assets of group will, after discharge of any liabilities, be transferred evenly to those charitable organisations that the group has affiliated to, or to a voluntary organisation with similar aims and objectives.

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ARG UK is the network of volunteer conservation groups, concerned with the native amphibians and reptiles of the UK.

