

DORMOUSE BREEDING SUCCESS

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The captive dormouse breeding unit in Dulverton, which was set up with the help of an Exmoor Sustainable Development Fund grant, has had a successful first full year's breeding activity with 16 healthy juveniles being produced. If all goes well, some of these youngsters will be sent to help repopulate other areas of the country where dormice once lived.

Tina and Peter Donnelly, who run the unit, have been monitoring dormice sites on Exmoor for the past 8 years and have established monitoring sites under the National Dormouse Monitoring Scheme on four sites within the National Park, as well as a small study in conjunction with the Forestry Commission in Croydon Forest.

Dormice form a part of English Nature's Species Recovery Plan and as an important part of the Exmoor Biodiversity Action Plan, dormice conservation has a national significance. Releases of captive bred dormice are helping to restore them to areas where they have been absent for many years, mainly due to changes in agriculture and forestry practices.

National Park Ecologist, Alison Cox, said "I am delighted that the Sustainable Development Fund was able to assist this very worthwhile project because whilst dormice are doing well on Exmoor, the situation in other parts of the country is not so encouraging. The Donnelly's interest and commitment is very inspiring and they have done a great deal of good work locally in getting people interested in these fascinating mammals."

Tina Donnelly said: "None of this would be taking place if it hadn't been for Doug Woods who sadly died over a year ago. He instigated idea to build special nestboxes to attract these rare animals and was also the first to start the captive breeding unit in his own garden at Cheddar. Many of the dormice that were used in the initial reintroduction scheme in 1993 in Cambridgeshire came from him and his stock is still being used today."

The Donnellys also had expert advice in setting up their dormouse breeding unit from Julian Chapman, Senior Head Keeper of Mammals at Paignton Zoo. Tina Donnelly said: "It's been a wonderful help having Julian's support and assistance and I'm sure his input has contributed to our success so far."

On a recent visit to the Donnelly's breeding unit Julian Chapman collected 9 of the juvenile dormice to take back to the mammal section of the zoo. Mr.

Chapman said: "While they are here we will be able to assess the dormice and make sure that they are putting on weight. If all goes well we hope to gradually introduce them to the wild later on this year."

Paignton Zoo and the Donnellys are part of a national organisation called the Common Dormouse Captive Breeders Group which co-ordinates the breeding and introduction to the wild of dormouse