

Andrew Thin, Chairman, SNH

Address to Lowland Deer Network Conference – 14 November 2011

Deer are a wild animal. In law they belong to nobody.

But in this country we have chosen to give landowners the sole right to take or kill deer that are on their land.

That right, as with all rights, brings with it a significant obligation.

Deer must be managed, both for their own welfare and because of the potential that they have to impact negatively on agriculture, forestry, public safety and the natural heritage.

In return for their sole right to take or kill, landowners are obliged to ensure that deer are managed effectively and sustainably on their land.

Other countries have taken alternative approaches.

Many do much the same as we do.

Others treat the right to take or kill wild deer as a public right.

Often managed with considerable sophistication by public authorities, so that the right is rationed to the public through some form of licensing system.

In a few countries there is effectively a free-for-all, but all too often the result of this has been population decline and severe damage to the resource itself.

From time to time there are calls in Scotland for a change to our system.

Usually for a change in favour of making the right to take or kill more of a public right.

And usually for some kind of rationing system through local authorities.

Comparisons are drawn with parts of Scandinavia and elsewhere.

But to date the Scottish people have been content to leave things as they are.

They like wild deer..... They do not like hunting.

A ridiculous generalisation of course, but one that it is as well to bear in mind nonetheless.

Because it underpins many political attitudes to deer.

The Scottish people as a whole like to see wild deer and they like to know that they are out there.

And they like to know that in so far as it is necessary to manage them this is being done by trained and skilled people who care as much about the deer as about the hunt.

But nothing is static in this world, and as with everything else the context within which our arrangements for deer management sit is constantly evolving.

The habitat within which deer in Scotland live has changed enormously over my lifetime.

Especially in Lowland Scotland and around towns, but in many Highland glens as well.

And as habitats change so do deer populations.

Moreover the competition that deer face from sheep and other grazing species is in constant flux, and in recent years has been in sharp decline.

The requirement of agriculture and forestry to be protected from the negative effects of deer has changed as new crops have been introduced and attempts made to reduce the use of fencing in some areas.

Traffic volumes on our roads continue to increase, as do driving speeds.

That has increased the number of deer related traffic accidents.

And the appalling accident on the M5 last weekend reminds us of how easy it is for one small distraction to trigger a catastrophe.

And finally, public concern about the state of our natural environment has increased enormously since Frank Fraser Darling first described the Scottish Highlands as “a man-made desert” some fifty years ago.

The Scottish people, through their elected governments, have tried hard to keep up with all this.

Deer policy and legislation has adapted. The Deer Commission (and now SNH) has been resourced and charged with ensuring that deer are managed sustainably and their welfare assured.

Many landowners have adapted too, and in much of Scotland they have kept to their side of the bargain that the Scottish people have implicitly struck with them.

But now we face new challenges, especially in the Lowlands.

The cost of managing deer is broadly accepted by landowners in circumstances when deer hunting and the resulting venison have a value sufficient to justify the cost.

But in many low ground and woodland situations this is not so. Some landowners - such as the Forestry Commission - spend huge amounts of money fulfilling their

obligation for deer management when the right to take deer on their land confers on them little if any benefit at all.

Many local authorities, private individuals and third sector landowners face a similar dilemma.

Yet many of these landowners, public and private, can ill afford this cost - especially in an era of severe economic austerity.

And why should they be responsible for the cost of managing a wild animal that belongs to nobody when they get no benefit from the parallel right to take it?

It is not the purpose of today to explore the rights and wrongs of our current statutory arrangements, although these are a legitimate subject of debate in this context.

The hard fact is that if you own land where deer live you have a legal (and in my view moral) obligation to manage them sustainably.

And the purpose of today is to help you to do that job.

There are many people here today who can help you do that job, and who are only too willing to do so.

Hunting for sport is, in my judgement, an underdeveloped recreation in this country.

It provides a great opportunity for people to get some exercise and fresh air, and to come home with a boot full of some of the highest quality food that you are likely to encounter.

For purely public health and well-being reasons we should encourage more of it.

If these people can also help landowners to manage deer while reducing their cost of doing so that is surely an even stronger argument in favour of sport hunting.

But the deer management challenge, especially in the lowlands, is not simply a matter of getting more guns on the ground - although this is a part of it.

Guns are dangerous. Many people do not like the idea of hunting. Deer are mobile - they can quickly re-colonise areas where existing populations have been killed.

So we need to ensure that all those who hunt, for whatever reason, are highly skilled at what they do.

We need to ensure that, where the management of deer is likely to impact directly on the wider public, we minimise that impact and interaction, and take people with us.

That will be challenging at times, but while people love to see deer in the wild and to know that they are there...

They also understand very well the hazard that a deer running across the M8 in fog during the rush hour represents.

And lastly, and perhaps above all else, we need to do this on a collective basis through DMGs or similar cooperative arrangements.

It is no use one landowner behaving responsibly if his neighbour does not.

Some of our greatest deer management challenges - deer living in the suburbs for example - can only be addressed through cooperative action involving neighbouring landowners.

So I hope that you find today useful. The theme is very much one of cooperation.

Cooperation between landowners to ensure that the job is done effectively and in a coordinated manner.

Cooperation between those who want to hunt deer and those who need deer culled on their land.

Cooperation between both of these and the wider public who have legitimate (though not always entirely rational) concerns.....

And who ultimately decide through the ballot box how we tackle issues like this in Scotland.

Cooperation between government - SNH, local authorities and others - and all these other interests so that we can ensure that the Scottish people get the deer management system that they want and require.