

Richard Cooke: closing address to Lowland Deer Network Conference

14 November 2011

Closing Remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen we have had a long and full day and we have now reached the last part of the programme. The presentations and discussions which have taken place this morning have set out the broad picture in which we have heard about the public interest in deer management as represented by the new legislation. We have also heard about the multiple objectives of those involved directly and indirectly with deer management. Deer represent either an opportunity or a threat, depending on your point of view, and whether you are a vocational stalker, farmer, forester, hands-on deer manager, environmentalist local authority representative or work in the public sector. They affect us all and our challenge is to make the most of our opportunities and minimise any possible negative impacts within the parameters of deer welfare, environmental sustainability, public safety and food safety.

Much of this may be common sense and part and parcel of what we all take to our deer management activities on a daily basis; but we are all accountable and we need not only to follow best practice and take full account of our responsibilities but also to be seen to do so.

I am most grateful to all those who have contributed today, both speakers and those who have participated in the excellent discussions. At this point I would therefore ask you to show your appreciation of our Speakers this morning and Panel participants this afternoon. May I also express my thanks and appreciation to FCS and SNH for assisting with the costs of this Conference today.

Moving on now to the proposal to set up a Scottish Lowland Deer Network.

Firstly a little about how this proposal has come about. The Association of Deer Management Groups, of which I am Chairman, was set up in 1992. In terms of its Constitution our remit is to service, support, advise and represent all deer managers of all species of deer anywhere in Scotland. As you will know our traditional territory is the Highlands and our mainstream members are the Highland Deer Management Groups. A number of the lowland Groups represented here are also members and over the years we have held a number of meetings in the South and East of Scotland.

However lowland deer management is quite different in character from the management of large herds of open range red deer which are shared as a resource by a small number of mostly large neighbouring land holdings with a relatively narrow range of management objectives. In the lowlands, where land is generally more economically productive, the landholdings - farms, small woodlands, large areas of forestry, local authority land, urban and semi urban areas, are much more fragmented. And the deer species themselves, mainly roe but also in certain areas red, sika and fallow (hopefully not muntjac but there are suggestions to the contrary) are much more localised in their movements, roe in particular being of a territorial rather than herding habit.

Although deer management groups do have a place in the lowlands where there is an identifiable common interest, as was exemplified this morning by the North Lanarkshire DMG presentation, very many of us involved directly with deer management work individually or with a small group of friends. Some, farmers in particular, may delegate their deer management to others through leases, but again deer management is delivered at very local scale.

Many organisations have an interest in deer management, in the case of the British Deer Society, exclusively so. You will note from the programme that although this event has been organised by ADMG and funded jointly between ADMG, Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage, that it has had the support of the other organisations with a direct interest in lowland deer management. I am extremely grateful for that support. The formation of a lowland deer network will continue to involve all our organisations working together.

A Scottish Lowland Deer Network will add value by co-ordinating existing effort and representation. It will provide a single and combined voice when legislation is brought forward or consultation papers need to be considered, or we are faced with new European regulation.

A network would also be a source of information both internally to its members and there would also be a public communications function. I think it may be fair to say that many members of the public, while they may see increasing numbers of deer in the course of their daily lives know little about them or how they are managed or the importance of their co-operation in ensuring that they are managed effectively, safely and humanely. The network would have a role to play in public education and in countering the ill informed comment that is all too familiar in the press.

Membership of the network would also provide representation on existing bodies such as the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group which, for those who manage deer as a business, provides the marketing platform and access to potential clients; also the Scottish Venison Partnership and the now well established Quality Assurance Scheme.

The Scottish Venison Partnership has been rather successful in promoting venison consumption in this country to the extent that there is now not enough to meet demand. Representation on the National Access Forum would also be important for those who have to carry out deer management where there are large numbers of people close by.

In addition to the general benefits that I have just described the Network would also provide a forum for increased contact and experience sharing between its members. It might, as you have heard from Ian Fergusson, assist in increasing the supply of land available for lease for deer management and it would also be able to assist in providing access to Best Practice advice and meeting training needs.

There are lots of topics which we have not been able to cover today, some of which I have just referred to for example venison marketing, public access issues, broader wildlife management issues, deer management as a business and so on; so there is plenty for the Network to be getting on with and plenty of interesting topics to put to you at future events.

So how would all this work?

ADMG has taken the lead in this to date and met the development costs incurred because I strongly believe that it needs doing and that now is the time to anticipate problems that may occur, as they occurred in the Highlands, where we are slow to react to changes in the impact of deer on other economic activities in the countryside, on the environment, and above all on people.

If there is a general feeling today and in the coming weeks and months that a lowland deer network would be valuable then the next steps would be as follows:-

- You will have on your chairs this afternoon an application form to join Lowland Deer Network Scotland (LDNS).
- Membership will be open to individuals but not to groups, although organisations, e.g. representative bodies, public agencies or local authorities could be affiliated to it. Separately, deer management groups can continue to be members of ADMG.
- There will be a starting annual subscription of £25 for membership of the Lowland Deer Network and the subscription year will be the calendar year, the first starting on 1 January 2012. The subscription will be payable by each individual who wishes to be a member of the network. An annual subscription would also be payable by affiliated organisations. I am investigating whether some start up funding support may be available from the Scottish Government.
- In return for your subscription you would receive not less than 2 Newsletters per year, an opportunity to attend an annual meeting and access and advice on any relevant matter such as the law, boundary issues, best practice and technical advice. Also assistance with mediation where problems arise.
- There will also be a dedicated web page for members of the Lowland Deer Network. This will be hosted initially under the ADMG website www.deer-management.co.uk/ldns. This is already up and running.
- Initially at least the Association of Deer Management Groups will act as the parent of the Scottish Lowland Deer Network although it may well in due course take on a life of its own.
- I will act as Chair initially and will set up a Development Group. I will take advice as to who should be on it but it should represent the lowland parts of Scotland geographically and also the different organisations and areas of interest, for example, farming and forestry etc, as well as including relevant public agency representation.
- The Development Group will prepare a draft Constitution and proposals for establishing a more permanent Executive Committee and will set out Objectives and an Action Plan, all to be brought forward for approval at a meeting in the second half of next year which would in due course become an Annual General Meeting. In the meantime members of the Network will receive regular updates.
- The meeting in 2012 would be the point at which to gauge interest and support for the Lowland Deer Network, put detailed proposals to the membership and formally constitute the Lowland Deer Network Scotland. In the meantime members of the network will receive regular updates.

I appreciate that I have probably provided more questions than answers. We don't have much more time for discussion this afternoon but I will be happy to respond to any observations or questions by e-mail or telephone after today. If there are one or two burning questions I can take them quickly now.

What I hope you will do is to take all the application forms on your chair away with you. If you wish to do so please complete one and send it in as soon as possible, or indeed if you wish to do so this afternoon please leave completed forms at the door. Subscription Notices for 2012 will follow later.

I would also hope that you will distribute application forms to friends and colleagues who you think may be interested. The effectiveness of the Network will, like every other organisation, depend on its membership and our credibility will require support from a large proportion of deer management practitioners and other interests, albeit it may take a little time for this to be achieved.

If I might speak particularly about the role of the local authorities I wrote personally to the Chief Executive of all the lowland local authorities inviting representation and I am very pleased to see a number of Council Officers here today. There are however a number that either did not respond or were unable to send a delegate and it is important that some of today's messages get back to them all. As we have heard, following on from the new legislation, local authorities have a general role in their area in relation to deer management and also direct involvement on land which they own or for which they have responsibility. I would therefore like to ask those local authority representatives present to please feedback today's messages internally in their organisations and also to network with opposite numbers in other local authorities. I would add that I am pleased to see Transport Scotland represented at this event. We all need to be in the loop.

We now have your e-mail contact details and within the next week or two will be in contact with you to direct your attention to the Conference papers which will be posted on the website which I referred to earlier. Please direct the attention of your friends and colleagues who may be interested in the Network to the website from which they will also be able to download membership application forms should they wish to join.

It only remains for me to thank you all for coming and for your interest.