

Introductory Presentation by Richard Cooke, Chairman, ADMG

Good Morning Everybody and welcome to the first meeting organised by ADMG in London. We are fortunate in that we generally achieve a very good turnout of anything up to 200 people at our Annual General Meetings and we also make ourselves locally accessible through our two or three Regional Meetings a year but we are conscious that, for all sorts of reasons, it is not possible for many deer forest owners to attend any of these events and on this occasion our intention is to put that right for at least some of you.

In the deer sector we find ourselves increasingly under the microscope and the phrase “the public interest” pops up regularly in Government Agency language. The passing of the Wildlife & Natural Environment (Scotland) Act in 2011 has given “the public Interest” a statutory basis in spelling out that all owners and managers of land have a responsibility for the management of wild deer. It is good that, due to our representations among others, the legislation preserved the voluntary basis of deer management despite much pressure from certain quarters to regulate. But there is a proviso that, before the legislation is reviewed in 2015, the sector needs to demonstrate that the voluntary principle works in terms of not only delivering the private objectives of land owners but also public accountability.

The voluntary approach hangs on three pegs which have been developed and agreed between the Scottish Government and the deer sector organisations. These include a 20 year Vision - “Wild Deer – A National Approach” which sets out the policy framework. This was published 5 years ago and is now due for its first review. Secondly we have the Code of Practice for Deer Management, produced by SNH in 2012 as a result of the Act, copies available here. And thirdly Best Practice, developed by the Deer Commission, now SNH, along with the relevant organisations, particularly ADMG. This defines in detail how deer management tasks are or should be carried out to the best achievable standards.

In other words, although the sector may not be regulated as such, there is a well defined prescription for how it should manage deer to secure deer welfare, public safety and food safety, as well as meeting the economic and social needs of those involved in the deer industry and delivering sustainable management of the environment. I know that most of this will be known to you but I am making the point that we already have a high level of intervention. I would add that this is a framework which has evolved over a period, and that ADMG has been closely involved, and which we believe is a reasonable structure to guide deer managers and against which we can be judged. By and large incidentally, we would maintain that the industry measures up pretty well.

So that touches briefly on the external factors which influence wild deer management in Scotland in 2013. In many ways the internal pressures experienced by deer management groups are more problematic.

There are now around 60 DMGs in the red deer range and an additional 10 or so, with new ones forming all the time, in the lowlands of Scotland. These lowland groups are now represented by our sister organisation, Lowland Deer Network Scotland, launched by ADMG in 2011.

Focusing this morning on the upland Groups, as recently as 20 years ago, the great majority of landholdings were traditional deer forests and within most DMGs neighbours were broadly pointing in the same direction i.e. maintaining a deer population that would yield a certain number of sporting stags annually. This remains the prior management objective of most estates today but over the intervening years there have been many changes of ownership or management policy and now almost every DMG has a diversity of management priorities within its membership which has made them much more complex.

Characteristically, along with the stalking estates there may be private landholdings managed for grouse, or for habitat improvement. There may also be estates owned by non Government organisations such as the National Trust for Scotland, John Muir Trust or RSPB and there may be properties owned by the Scottish Government through Scottish Natural Heritage or Forestry Commission Scotland. Mixed in with all of that there are many designated sites, some not in satisfactory condition due partly to deer, and we also have other land uses such as hill farming and tourism, along with the general right of responsible access to throw into the mix.

The implication for deer populations is that these different management objectives require different densities of deer and in supporting DMGs ADMG continually comes up against what I call “the 12/4 dilemma”. Stalking estates may require a density of say 12 deer per square kilometre but, at the other extreme, properties whose priority is habitat regeneration will aspire to a density of 4 or less per square kilometre. Without fencing, and fencing is not always either practicable or desirable, with a free ranging population the impacts tend to fall in the wrong places. So in a winter storm all the deer seek shelter and food where they can best find it and that often means in the areas where young trees have been planted or are regenerating and in that situation something must give. Such “emergency” situations can mean an unacceptable level of economic damage to woodland or farm crops, or environmental damage to habitats. This can and has led to emergency culling which can have an impact on the deer population for stalking neighbours. To give an example, this is what happened in several areas during the severe winter of 2010/11 where Forest Enterprise culled numbers of deer seeking shelter in plantations, with a heavy effect on neighbouring estates.

ADMG has now agreed a Protocol with FES whereby in similar future situations FES has committed not to take action until neighbours have been alerted and given the opportunity to work with FES staff to drive out the deer from vulnerable young woods.

However within DMGs where deer are a resource for some but are a threat for others, these difficulties will inevitably crop up from time to time. Sadly many DMGs find these conflicts irreconcilable and, in a worst case scenario, and there are a few examples, the DMGs cease to function. There is no doubt that DMGs have to grapple with some extremely difficult issues but the advice of ADMG is that it can only be resolved by members sticking together and acting as neighbours should, with a willingness to respect the land management objective of others and be willing to compromise. Easier said than done but ADMG stands ready to assist and has been involved in a mediating capacity in a number of such situations over the last few years.

During the course of the morning we will update you on various matters. In particular Dick Playfair will report on the political climate in Scotland in so far as it has a bearing on estate ownership and management in general and on deer management in particular. Without stealing his thunder I would simply comment that, in Scotland, the political climate is significantly more left wing than south of the Border. There are some advantages of Devolution in that we find access to the higher levels of the Scottish Government, and indeed meetings with Ministers, (we saw the Environment Minister Paul Wheelhouse in April) much easier than would be the case at Westminster. Furthermore, whereas even four or five years ago rural policy was heavily biased towards the environment, a much better balance is now apparent. Indeed the SNH Code of Practice, to which I referred earlier, explicitly spells out that “sustainable deer management” means **sustainable** not just in environmental terms but equally in economic and social terms. This is a very welcome change and we observe it in all our dealings with Government bodies such as Scottish Natural Heritage and the Forestry Commission, albeit the message has not quite got through at all levels in those organisations. Despite that, Land Reform remains high on the agenda and we now have a situation where the political parties are competing to be the most radical; and of course we have the prospect of the Independence Referendum next year. I shall say no more about that just now as we will shortly hear from Dick.

You will also hear about some of the other areas in which ADMG is currently active, in particular in the Scottish Venison Partnership, again from Dick. Also on the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group from Sarah Troughton. Considerable success stories in both cases. Also the National Access Forum, Moorland Forum and Deer Management Round Table.

As you see from the Agenda, Finlay Clark the ADMG Secretary for those few who don't know him will have more to say on the role of ADMG. We will also hear from SNH. Robbie Kernahan is the Wildlife Head of Operations and Linzi Seivwright is one of the Area Wildlife Officers who is also seconded part time to work with ADMG in supporting DMG capacity building.

I think you will also find the two case studies, one of a proactive estate, Glenfalloch from David Lowes, and the other of West Ross DMG by its Chairman, Randall Wilson informative and thought provoking. Finally Andrew Gordon, Vice Chairman, will wrap up the morning.

I hope you will find the morning worthwhile and interesting I am aware that for many of you some of what we have to say is old news but we do want to leave you with a good flavour of the realpolitik as it applies to the ownership and management of land and the management of deer in Scotland; also with a view of where it may go in future. ADMG always attempts to be constructive and creative in its discussions with Government and, along with the Lowland Deer Network we aspire to represent all deer managers of all species of deer anywhere in Scotland, regardless of their objectives. We believe we have reasonable influence and credibility with Scottish Government and its Agencies and we attempt to introduce new ideas and fresh thinking where appropriate. We do our best to represent all views, sometimes not an easy task when deer and conflict are often not far apart, and we do not take sides. I remember Patrick Gordon-Duff-Pennington during his time as Chairman of the Red Deer Commission saying in his inimitable way that he was “for the deer”. Well ADMG would claim to a similar position. We are for good and sustainable deer management and for all the valuable things which the deer economy delivers and in particular for the people who are most associated with it.

Now over to Dick Playfair, the longstanding Political and Media Adviser to ADMG: