

A reflection on the 2014-16 Deer Management Group assessment process

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This review gives some personal insight into the deer management planning and assessment process that involved all of Scotland's 44 DMGs from 2014 to 2016. The process was a good one, engagement was always forthcoming, progress has been enormous and a great deal of useful information has been gathered which should allow for more informed landscape-scale management of our uplands in the future. There are rough edges and the assessment process should be reviewed and streamlined to aid with monitoring progress in the future, and this should be a priority action going forwards.

This paper is based on experience of those groups (Breadalbane DMG, South Perthshire DMG, Arran DMG, Knoydart DMG, East Sutherland DMG and NW Sutherland DMG), as well as feedback from other consultants and DMG areas and communications with both Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and ADMG.

This paper was written in September 2016, two months before the SNH review *Deer Management in Scotland: Report to the Scottish Government* was published. It is therefore not a critique of that report.

Background

In November 2013, the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment (RACCE) Committee of the Scottish Parliament, having taken a range of evidence, decided that the deer management industry in Scotland needed to demonstrate a “step change” in how it operated, especially in relation to communications and delivery of public interest with a review of progress to take place at the end of 2016. To aid the process, and to focus in on the issues involved, SNH re-organised its Wildlife Operations Unit to provide the necessary support and oversight, and £200,000 of funding was made available to cover up to half of the cost of new deer management plans (DMPs). This turned out to be exactly the level of funding required, and the more focused allocation of SNH personnel was an essential part of the whole.

Getting Started

Before the RACCE Committee took evidence on the sector, ADMG had already been developing a Benchmark document which was to be used for delivering Best Practice in how deer groups operated. Because of this, the ADMG Executive Committee was presented with a draft document in very early January 2014, just a matter of weeks after the RACCE Committee reported. At that point, it was not clear what the industry reaction to such an initiative would be, so support in principle was sought and unanimously received at the ADMG AGM in February 2014. The document was consulted upon through the spring, including with SNH and interested environmental organisations. Support from all was forthcoming, and the ADMG Benchmark was officially endorsed at the Scottish Game Fair in July that year. Very few changes were required to the initial draft.

This Benchmark document provided a range of criteria by which the operation of DMGs could be assessed.

The more difficult part of the process was to develop a procedure by which the public interest could be assessed in a meaningful way. While the “public interest” had been discussed in general terms for over decade, both SNH and previously the Deer Commission for Scotland (DCS) had always struggled to define this in a way which might then be applied at a DMG or property level.

Efforts to devise such an assessment process were undertaken by SNH in the spring of 2014, based on actions in its *Wild Deer- A National Approach* document. ADMG was consulted to help produce a workable first draft that was ready by the middle of July. SNH was wary of the timescale required to assess and produce new DMPs for all groups, and that process could not begin until a Public Interest assessment document was produced. For this reason, no external consultation took place on this document, other than some initial input from ADMG. In retrospect, that was a mistake, as the document could have been usefully improved through involving various environmental groups and gathering wider support. The result was a slightly rushed and imperfect document that many people did not quite understand, and this would cause many problems in the subsequent assessments. The environmental groups felt excluded from the process.

There were no rules as such, little structure and guidance, and much could be left open to interpretation. However, this did mean that different consultants and SNH staff could think freely about how to interpret the criteria, and a range of good ideas emerged. The process turned out to be a creative one, and this will lead to a better system in future.

The scale of the task should however be acknowledged. In a very short timescale and under considerable pressure, SNH managed to define a range of public interest criteria in the kind of meaningful way that had eluded efforts in previous years. They developed an imperfect process, but one which can be reviewed and improved now going forwards.

The public interest criteria having been agreed, an assessment against both the Benchmark document and the Public Interest document could then begin, and this process was completed within two months. This allowed DMGs to tender for consultants to deliver new plans. Some of them applied to SNH to cover 50 per cent of costs. Other plans were delivered or upgraded in-house at entirely private cost.

DMGs had to establish the terms of reference within their own areas, put together steering groups, and achieve support from all their members, a proportion of whom would have been suspicious of the process at the beginning. This process of selling the initiative was important, and took time. As such, the majority of plans could not be commissioned before the spring of 2015, and scheduled to be endorsed at a spring 2016 group meeting. If this seems like a protracted period, it should be remembered that fieldwork was often required, at least two rounds of consultation were necessary and, with everyone being expected to take forward plans on the same approximate timescale, the pressure on SNH to reply to enquiries and comment on plans was very high. Other organisations often lacked the capacity to respond quickly to consultation. Frequently, it was several months in some cases before feedback was forthcoming, and even then, much was of a generic nature, with little understanding of the areas concerned.

One crucial bottleneck at the outset was the shortage of experienced consultants who could develop deer management plans, and this was a real issue for several DMGs who could not initially source people who could take their plans forward. One positive outcome of the assessment and planning process is that a number of new people have been attracted in to the industry, often from an environmental, former agency or agricultural background, and who would bring new perspectives to the table. SNH allowed some flexibility with payment schedules so that some Groups could operate with a slightly later finishing time.

As it was, almost all Groups had new plans in place by April - June 2016, when they were re-assessed, albeit many had loose ends to tie up beyond that point, and then a programme of actions to start taking forwards over the coming five to ten year period.

One or two problems

There were two political problems within the period.

The first, in the spring of 2015, was the suggestion that new deer management measures would be taken forward in a new Land Reform Bill anyway, despite this previous undertaking to fund and support a new approach. ADMG supported new powers for SNH that could subsequently be used if action in a particular area could not be achieved in any other way. The measures taken forward in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, from a deer management perspective, were therefore welcomed as being practical and proportionate to the issues involved (*"a sharp instrument, not a blunt instrument"*).

More troublesome was the SNH report on the 2014 assessment, which was published during the Land Reform Bill debates in the autumn of 2015. At the initial assessment, DMG areas were asked to take an honest and critical view of how they operated, and to identify areas where no actions were taking place, or where these were not being documented. To this end, a high proportion of actions were marked down as 'red', often because they simply were not being documented, or because no analysis had taken place to determine how a public interest was actually being delivered within that DMG. Much of this was to be expected as the criteria had been newly defined, and previous DMPs would not have incorporated them.

During the debates, these poorer scores were viewed by some as evidence of the deer management sector performing badly; the report that followed suggested that the assessment/planning process was a waste of time and that the Scottish Government should move directly to regulation. This misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the process, willful or otherwise, came very close to destabilising the whole exercise. It became very clear that many people simply did not understand the process that was by then well underway. To their credit, the DMG areas proceeded undaunted with their work, but this was a difficult and unnerving time. For its part, ADMG resolved to be more proactive in how the process was presented at the final review, and that this task would not be left entirely to others.

The following is a commentary on the various elements within both the Benchmark and Public Interest assessments; the good things and problems associated with each.

BENCHMARK ASSESSMENT - OPERATION OF THE DMG

Area and boundaries

Most Groups had well-established boundaries, but the planning process did allow for analysis of this and provided the opportunity to make any recommendations for change. These were usually modest in extent, and involved the inclusion of some smaller properties around the periphery of a group, perhaps to coincide with a road or river. For example, in South Perthshire, two private properties and Perth & Kinross Council were recruited as new members to the Group. More significantly, a case was made for extending the group across the A9 to cover the Dunkeld area, and options for that were explored.

In some cases, changes to the sub-area structure of Groups were made.

Elsewhere, encouragement and support has been given to new potential DMG areas such as those being developed in Cowal, in South Sutherland, and on several of the islands, including Sleat on Skye.

Membership

Membership of Groups was generally seen to be good, although most Groups had peripheral members, and smaller properties that did not participate. Many such properties still engaged with the process, and often gave a different perspective on the operation of a Group. In many areas, the majority of properties did not regard themselves as “deer forests”, but had a much wider range of land use activities and objectives. Deer were only one of a number of things they had an interest in, and they would ration their time devoted to it. In a number of cases, lapsed members were encouraged to re-join as associate or reporting members. It is hugely important to understand that DMG areas are not just made up of deer forests. There are a wide range of objectives and scales of working, and very often, farming, fishing, forestry or conservation management are more important, and over-riding objectives, and the input from owners towards deer reflects this.

Meetings

DMG meetings have traditionally been a mixture of business and social. ADMG seminars on leadership and promotion of good practice have significantly improved the business-like running of many Groups, and throughout the planning process, Groups appreciated very simple advice on how to improve different aspects of how they functioned as a unit.

Moving forwards, and looking at the increased expectations being placed on DMGs, this will impact on the structure and timing of meetings, in that action plans will have to be discussed, reported on and monitored, and this all takes time. A number of Groups have set up small steering groups in order to take forward workloads between meetings. This all takes more volunteer time and commitment, and there is an appreciation among most Groups that this will now be required, although others may still be oblivious to this, and this is a situation that ADMG will have to monitor closely. Can DMGs put in the time required to deliver what is being expected of them? This is a point that must be actively managed. It is important not to overload Groups with expectations that cannot realistically be met.

Constitution and finances

While some DMG areas did have their own constitutions, many did not, and ADMG produced a template constitution for easy adoption by Groups as part of the process. That has worked very well.

With finances, Groups ranged from those handling many thousands of pounds annually to those who only raised a few hundred pounds to cover necessary expenses. In such cases an individual member probably handled the banking requirements. Looking forwards, greater workloads, expenses and turnover might be expected, and a number of Groups opened dedicated bank accounts, and prepared budgets for the first time. Members welcomed this more professional approach and the benefit of having a paid secretary/administrator has been accepted by most Groups now.

Deer Management Plan

Contrary to wider opinion, the vast majority of DMGs did have existing plans, many of which were very focused on detail and probably meaningless to most people outwith that particular area. They were never designed for wider circulation. The new plans coming forward tend to be simpler, with a greater emphasis on communication, website presence and mapping. Population modelling looking forwards makes the plans more functional, and habitat monitoring is accepted as an important part of the whole. There has been virtually no resistance to this change, and it partly reflects the reality that most keepers and stalkers are now computer literate, used to social media, and are happy to share and exchange videos and anecdotes about their work and why they do it. They therefore see very little threat in communicating to a wider audience what they do.

Code of Practice on Deer Management

The Code has been referenced in all DMPs and constitutions, and there is an increasing awareness of why it exists and what it is designed to do. On a practical level, it can be included in the Agenda of a meeting to allow people to bring up any issues of genuine concern relating to deer management in their area.

ADMG Principles of Collaboration

As above, these have been included in all plans and constitutions, and set the right tone for how Groups should operate.

Wild Deer Best Practice Guidance

Such guidance has been widely accepted over the last 10 years or so, and is a good example of what the deer sector and Government agencies can achieve when they work together. There is now some considerable regret that reduced funding impacts on SNH ability to further develop this programme. Options to allow this to evolve will need to be developed, and ADMG has started an initiative to raise private funds to help deliver this.

Data and evidence gathering - deer counts

Counting can be very variable in quality, with smaller Groups with plenty of staff producing the better results. The topography within many DMG areas is extremely difficult, and reviewing the information available makes you realise what a huge logistical exercise deer counting actually is. Perhaps 5,000 - 12,000 deer need to be counted in remote country, at altitude, under snow conditions, in a co-ordinated manner, in one day if possible, with many personnel having other commitments as well. Typically, a count will be organised at short notice to take advantage of suitable weather. In many ways, we should not be surprised if the results are sometimes less than perfect. Very flat ground in the far north is as troublesome as high, remote country that is difficult to access.

Those who find it most difficult to count tend to be the more peripheral members of Groups with other commitments, or properties where the topography and scale are very difficult. Age and physical ability are an issue for some.

However, there are relatively few Groups which do not have recent count information which is reliable enough for population modelling purposes. Some Groups are excellent at counting, with a small minority counting twice a year. A high proportion of Groups have good recent helicopter count data. Deer counting is the most basic function that is required of a DMG and the planning process has provided a good opportunity just to re-emphasise this if it was necessary to do so.

The collated deer count data across all Groups gives a total open range population of approximately 243,000 red deer, down from the SNH estimate of 275,000 in 2013. It should be noted that there have been 31 Groups with more up to date information since 2013, with a high proportion of those being helicopter counts, and the new data reflects this. This figure does not include woodland deer.

Table 1 – Estimate of Scotland’s open range red deer population 2016

DMG	Estimated population	Year	Notes
Affric and Kintail	2741	2016 HC	Good count
Ardnamurchan	1803	2016 HC	
Arran	1873	2016 FC	Regarded as being very good count
Balquhider	1589	March 2016 FC	Probably undercount by 200 - 300
Blackmount	7325	2015 HC	Adjusted from 8284 which included some areas outwith DMG
Breadalbane	9009	Spring 2015 HC	Regarded as being good count
Cairngorm Speyside	4103	2010 DCS count	Prob reduced numbers since 2010
East Knoydart	5306	Nov 2014 HC	Regarded as being good count
East Loch Ericht	4849	Feb 2015 count	Good count
East Loch Shiel	3821	March 2016 HC	Regarded as good, accurate count
East Ross	1778	2008	Likely stable, closed population
East Sutherland	12213	Spring 2016 projection from 2015 FC	Likely underestimate by 2000 or so
East Grampian – SA1	5226	2016 HC	Good count
EGDMG - Birse	155	2016 HC	Good count
EGDMG – SA2	7586	2015 FC	Good annual foot count
EGDMG – SA5	5502	FC 15.04.16	Partial count only. Count complicated by Glenavon having moved from Cairngorms Speyside
Gairloch	278	2016 Torridon only	No recent reliable DMG count data
Glenartney	3178	2015 FC	Good count
Glenelg	4197	January 2016 FC	Good count in line with expectations
Glenmoriston	3667	2016 March HC	
Harris and Lewis	1297	March 2016 FC	Good count, coordinated with SNH, local stalking club and neighbours walking previously agreed lines
Inveraray and Tyndrum	2573	2016 FC	Likely significant underestimate, 30 % area is trees
Islay	4415	2016 HC	Islay Estates 2016 FC suggests number should be 389 higher
Lochalsh	7040	Spring 2016 HC	Count likely to include numbers from neighbouring DMG areas
Mid West	11045	2011 HC	No good Group wide count since
Moidart	1800	2016 estimate	Likely to be stable population
Monadhliath	18984	2013 HC	Likely underestimate given area of forestry
Morvern	3890	2012 FC	No info on likely accuracy
Mull	7707	2011 estimate	Not 100 per cent coverage
North Ross	14348	2015 SNH HC	Good count
Northern	11778	2013 HC	Good count, although high proportion of forestry with Group. Numbers likely stable, although management changes since 2013
NW Sutherland	5879	Spring 2016 FC	Underestimate as some properties did not count, possibly by 1000 deer or so
South Perthshire	4856	December 2009 HC	Current deer pop likely significantly less than 4000 due to local reduction for grouse moor management
S Ross, Strathconnon	8669	Spring 2016 HC	Includes 500 deer fenced off from main

			DMG area
SW Ross	1631	April 2016 FC	Partial count only, await confirmation of August 2016 count
Strathfarrar	8223	2016 HC	This is a significant increase from modeled population previously quoted and will likely include some immigration from neighbouring Groups
Strathtay	1238	2016 FC	Good count
W Sutherland East	4517	Feb 2016 HC	Good count but DMP suggests a downgraded figure to 4066
W Sutherland North	2653	Feb 2016 HC	Good count but DMP suggests total should be slightly higher at 2695
W Sutherland South	1819	Feb 2016 HC	Good count but may be some double counting/overlaps due to time taken to complete whole W Sutherland area, esp on boundary between East and West Groups
W Sutherland - APSG	1806	Feb 2016 HC	As above
W Grampian	13916	2015 FC	Likely to be good count
W Knoydart	1142	2016 FC	Regarded as accurate, but may have some deer from E Knoydart included
W Lochaber	4745	2015	Incomplete due to welfare concerns on one property with deep snow
W Ross	11000	2009	Partial counts since then
Total	243170		

*Note: FC denotes foot count. HC denotes helicopter count. The data for DMG areas marked * has been updated in December 2016 to reflect new information received on 2016 counts.*

Data and evidence gathering - culls

Most cull information is very good, although sometimes incomplete. As above, it is smaller, more peripheral properties which sometimes lapse in providing information. Larder data can be variable in quality, and could be very useful if more Groups would gather data on a consistent basis, although the majority would not have the administrative capacity currently to analyse this properly.

The operation of many DMGs is significantly improved when they provide all cull information prior to meetings, and it is small things like this that can really transform the workings of a Group. Failure to collate and distribute cull data can be used as an early warning signal that a Group is not operating effectively.

Data and evidence Gathering - habitat monitoring

Habitat monitoring activity is very variable, with all Groups having some members who carry this out, at least to some degree, but many, often a majority, who do not. The limiting factor tends to be an inability to collate and properly analyse the information, and to coordinate and prepare a monitoring programme. As with counting, smaller properties with other commitments struggle to justify the time required for habitat monitoring, especially if one person is responsible for a wide range of activities.

ADMG has been working with SNH to pilot and roll out a system to help with data storage and analysis for this very reason, although that has now been affected by funding cuts, and ADMG is seeking to complete this important work with private funding also.

Essentially, the habitat monitoring work is viewed as being relatively simple and most stalkers have been on training courses, but proper coordination and interpretation is much more difficult. This is where the focus going forwards must lie.

Competence

Uptake of deer management qualifications tends to be very good, with typically 80 - 90 per cent + of personnel having DMQ 1, and slightly less with DMQ 2. This is a drastic change over 15 years or so, and is improving continually as all new college graduates will hold these qualifications.

There is some degree of confusion about how 'trained hunter' status is defined, usually among part-time stalkers and smaller properties outwith the normal lines of industry communications. Clarification has been given to several Groups.

Training

A high proportion of staff have a wider range of certificates and qualifications which relate to their jobs: first aid, manual handling, ATV use, pesticide use, chainsaw use etc. There is a more obvious training culture than there was 20 years ago, at least among those properties with full time employees.

Venison marketing

Membership of the Scottish Quality Wild Venison scheme averaged 40-60% across most Groups, but this ranged from zero to 100 per cent. Many properties had good, up to date game larders, more than adequate for the scheme, but did not believe that there was any economic advantage to being a member. At the beginning of the scheme, it was thought that inadequate facilities might have been a barrier to joining, but this appears not to be the case now. The planning process did however prompt some new properties to join. A number of DMG areas have agreed to focus on this issue and try to increase SQWV uptake.

Some good examples of collaborative marketing have been evidenced eg the Rannoch single collection scheme was very successful. On Arran, there is one single game larder, SQWV assured, which all properties use, both private and public.

In many areas however, especially in the far north, the sheer distance between properties means that many have to be self sufficient with regards to their processing facilities, and larder sharing was not really practical. In some of the crofting areas, it was suggested that shared deer/lamb larders would be beneficial, but that legislation prevented such shared use from being possible. This sort of initiative would be very valuable in helping promote cross-industry and community links, and arguably benefit the local sheep farming economy as much as the deer sector, perhaps much more so.

Communications

Almost all DMGs took advantage of the initiative by ADMG to provide websites, either standalone sites, or pages within the ADMG site. This provided the opportunity to present their new DMPs, as well as allowing contact information for Groups to be readily available. Already, there have been a range of good examples of people finding information about deer locally through these websites, or contact made with DMG secretaries regarding issues that might have arisen.

The response to open consultation events was mixed, with some being well attended and others not. Many community councils did not respond to contact when made, although many acknowledged the source of information that now existed. The most common enquiry was about deer on roads. A number of local communities appreciated the employment opportunities that arose from deer management.

There has been virtually no resistance to having a greater level of information made available. As previously suggested, this is probably due, at least in part, to keepers and stalkers being increasingly comfortable with social media and the opportunities that this brings for articulating what they do and why.

PUBLIC INTEREST OUTCOMES

Develop mechanisms to manage deer

The 2014 and 2016 assessments were generally regarded as very useful exercises by the DMGs, and encouragement was given to undertake these in an honest and critical manner.

The process was regarded officially as 'self-assessment' in 2014, but that was certainly not the case in 2016. SNH prepared its assessment in advance of meetings, after consultation with colleagues and line managers, and subsequent meetings with DMG personnel usually only resulted in modest changes to this. Any suggested changes had then to be agreed with the SNH personnel previously consulted. This was all good, because the process could be seen to be robust, but it was certainly not 'self-assessment'. It was quite a thorough process, overseen by a Government agency that had the final word. While the two assessments were supposed to have been done on the same basis, there is no question that a much higher degree of proof was required in 2016, and some unrealistic interpretations of the criteria were in evidence. There was also some inconsistency in assessments between different areas, with some SNH staff having very high expectations of what was possible, and others willing to give the benefit of the doubt if they were of the opinion that a genuine intention to deliver existed.

In summary, the 2016 assessment was undoubtedly much more rigorous than the 2014 assessment, and the improvement of scores should be seen in this context. The more rigorous (but more inconsistent) approach coincided with a change to the structure of SNH, with the Wildlife Operations unit being effectively split up, and staff from regional offices taking on line management responsibility.

One other change was evident between the two years. It was anticipated at the outset that if SNH signed plans off, then this was an acknowledgement that the plan was fit for purpose. That was a reasonable expectation to have, and should have delivered a robust and fair process. However, in 2015, there was a reluctance to sign plans off as 'fit for purpose', this being replaced with "fulfilling the terms of the grant aid offered". To a significant extent, this undermined the planning process, with DMPs produced not being officially endorsed as addressing the issues present in any particular area. A doubt was created that plans would subsequently be seen not to be adequate. The outcome of this has been that, after two years of planning activity and substantial investment, it is not possible to say how many plans are indeed 'fit for purpose', and how many are not. For whatever reason, SNH has not seen fit to commit to that view. Those Groups with good plans are therefore not officially recognised as they should have been after the work put in.

Delivering designated features into Favourable Condition

ADMG has provided a separate analysis on this elsewhere.

Suffice to say that the planning process allowed Groups to zero in on areas of priority, and to determine those that were affected by deer, and those affected by other pressures. SNH paid particular attention to designated sites during the planning process.

For designated woodland features, it is clearly the case that we are now down to a hard core of difficult sites, and Agency led initiatives to deal with many of these are in progress.

On the large open hill designated sites, while many of these are in agreed systems of management, the necessary changes are slow simply because of the nature of the habitats involved, probably requiring many decades and, therefore, a realistic view needs to be taken as to how long it will be before some of these areas finally return to favourable condition.

Manage deer to retain existing Native Woodland cover and improve woodland condition in the medium to long term.

ADMG has provided a separate analysis of this. The Scottish Government is looking to see 60 per cent of native woodland across the country in “satisfactory condition” by 2020. This requires a mixture of low or medium herbivore impacts, and levels of non-native tree species and invasive species within acceptable limits.

In terms of herbivore pressure, which includes domestic livestock as well as deer, the average acceptable levels across the DMG areas are already at 67 per cent, well above the target of 60 per cent, with only 6 DMG areas below 60 per cent.

However, when non-native tree levels and invasive species are taken in to account, exactly 50 per cent of native woodlands in the DMG areas are in satisfactory condition. Reaching the 60 per cent level would therefore require an improvement in 10 per cent of the area of native woodlands in the DMG areas, or 11,168ha. It might be assumed that this is most easily done by targeted herbivore control, but management of non-native tree species and eradication of invasive species will also have a part to play.

Because non-native tree species and invasive species are more prevalent outside the DMG areas, only 40 per cent of native woods in these areas are in satisfactory condition, requiring an improvement in 20 per cent of the area of native woods, or 32,544ha.

The important conclusion is that, in terms of achieving the 60 per cent figure across the country, 75 per cent of the effort required, in terms of area, will have to take place outwith the DMG areas. The current narrative does not recognise this.

Regarding the planning process, the opportunity was taken to identify clusters of native woodlands which could be targeted for deer control. In many cases, this was possible. Elsewhere, it was sometimes demonstrated that pressures had been reduced from the survey date. Sometimes the herbivore pressure listed could be easily challenged. In one DMG area, targeted removal of non-native species, already in a management plan, would help deliver the required area in satisfactory condition. This latter point is important. Improving the condition of native woodlands requires a focus on herbivore pressures, non-native species and invasive species, with the latter two being more entrenched and expensive to remedy in many areas. A suite of management actions is required, depending on what is actually present in a given area.

Demonstrate DMG contribution to woodland expansion target

The planning process offered a good opportunity to assess what activity Groups had been engaged with in the past, and to scope out what potential area of planting might take place going forwards. This process was aided by SNH making available

datasets and mapping polygons showing woodland creation that took place under SRDP, SFGS and WGS schemes going back more than 20 years.

Table 2 - Planting activity in DMG areas in the last round of SRDP 2008 – 2014

RDC Option	RDC in DMGs	RDC outwith DMGs	Total ha	% in DMG	% of DMG planting
Productive conifer, low cost	2,650	3,832	6,482	41	11
Productive conifer, high cost	458	313	770	59	2
Productive broadleaf woodland	153	283	436	35	1
Native woodland planting	19,000	9,330	28,330	67	78
Native woodland – natural regeneration	1,015	320	1,335	76	4
Mixed conifer/broadleaved	783	1,444	2,227	35	3
N & W Isles Native woodland	3	30	33	10	0
Central Scotland Mixed woodland	343	1,464	1,807	19	1
TOTAL	14,405	17,016	41,442	59% in DMG area	100

The figures show that 59 per cent of all woodland planting and 67 per cent of native woodland planting took place within the DMG areas in Scotland, in addition to 76 per cent of all native woodland natural regeneration. 78 per cent of all planting within the DMG areas was with native species, with the primary motivation of owners being on habitat diversification and shelter for the future.

It should be taken from this that the contribution of DMG areas to national targets has been very good.

Looking forwards, potential planting within the next 5 - 10 year period was much more modest. Possible planting schemes totalling several thousand hectares were possible in some areas, in others, totals of 300 - 500ha were given. An important part of the context for this was the changing grant rates under the new 2014 - 2020 SRDP, whereby the rates for native woodland planting were reduced by £400/ha. As can be seen from above, it is primarily native planting (78 per cent) that is taking place within the DMG areas. Forestry Commission data shows a significant drop in woodland creation between 2015 and 2016, falling from 7600ha to 4600ha, with the fall of 3000ha being made up almost exclusively by a fall in native woodland planting. This is a very early indication that this fall in grant support is going to impact upon woodland creation in the north and west of the country going forwards. The withdrawal of annual payments and increased bureaucracy associated with applications will also be adding to this.

In the re-assessment process, making a judgement as to whether a given level of planting was appropriate or not could cause difficulties, with few rules or guidelines in place by which to make that judgement. This is an area that requires considerable thought and development going forwards.

Monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside

As has already been noted, habitat monitoring varies in extent and effectiveness, and is usually targeted on designated sites, with habitats in the wider countryside being regarded as secondary to this. For large areas, no information on impacts is available.

The focus of DMPs has therefore been to get a programme of habitat monitoring in place.

For much of the period 2014 - 16, a key message from both ADMG and the Government agencies has been that the new SRDP should be able to provide funds to help cover part of the cost of training, co-ordination and interpretation of habitat monitoring.

The mechanisms available for this now seem to be much less useful than hoped for, and should be reviewed to make them more suitable for purpose at the earliest opportunity. However, it now also appears that funding is being rapidly taken up by other projects.

A number of Groups have simply decided to fund their own habitat monitoring from 2017 onwards. That is to be welcomed, although not all properties are in a position to do this, and the oversight by SNH that a formal application for funds would have required will not be in evidence in privately funded monitoring. A joint effort at delivering this would almost certainly produce better results.

Improve Scotland's ability to store carbon

This section relates to management of existing forests, woodland creation, and bog habitats.

A surprisingly high proportion of woodlands are actively managed, or have been in the very recent past. This applies to both public sector and private sector forestry.

As previously suggested, there is some concern that reducing grant rates for native woodland creation will adversely affect planting in the north and west of the country, and this is a situation which may have to be reviewed in light of experience.

The level of knowledge about blanket bog habitats outwith designated sites is relatively poor, and habitat monitoring on such areas will be a priority going forward for many Groups. Bog habitats are present in all DMG areas, and are sometimes very extensive, especially in the north where tens of thousands of hectares can be present.

Many properties challenge the protocol for assessing blanket bog habitats, in that any sign of deer (footprints or droppings) will automatically classify that area as failing the criteria for good health. Such discussions may be a feature of the period ahead.

Reduce or mitigate the risk of invasive, non- native species

Almost all groups were happy to sign up to a policy of keeping non-native deer species within existing boundaries, or to eradicate them if numbers were relatively small. Sika and fallow deer are well established in many areas, and removal of them entirely is impractical.

Protection of historic and cultural features

While, in theory, this is a good public interest to consider, in practice, almost no such sites are negatively impacted by deer, and little information to this effect was forthcoming in consultations. A case could be made for excluding this section from any future assessment, or it could be relegated to a sub-heading. The main risks to such sites include inappropriate tree planting or the winter feeding of livestock. Light deer grazing is usually a benefit, particularly if it prevents damaging tree growth on archaeological sites.

Delivering higher standards of competence in deer management

As has previously been noted, training levels within the deer sector are now very good, and improving all the time as new graduates come in to the profession.

The areas of least uptake are on smaller properties with part time staff, or those on which deer management is just a small proportion of a wider range of activities that take place.

Contribute to public health and wellbeing

This section contained a wide range of miscellaneous public interest elements, many of which were important in their own right.

Deer vehicle collisions (DVCs) are a particular issue in many areas, and were one of the issues most frequently brought up by local communities. While in some areas, problems were a direct consequence of numbers of deer, in many other areas, the reasons for accidents were much more complex. A majority of DMG areas had very low incidents of traffic accidents, largely because they were remote and the road network was very limited.

The vast majority of deer-traffic accidents in Scotland take place in the lowlands and in the central belt, where the road network is more extensive, and usually involve roe deer.

Food safety and meat hygiene is best maintained through appropriate training and facilities, and these have been covered elsewhere in this document.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in deer has a high profile at the moment, following the recent cases found in Scandinavia, and Groups are taking measures to decrease the risk of this coming to Scotland. Input at a higher level is required however by both UK and Scottish Governments.

People are generally much more aware now of Lyme Disease, but ticks are present over a wide range of habitats, even in urban Scotland, and dealing with this issue requires input on many different levels. The risk for stalkers themselves is now well known and respected. Where ticks are present in and around local villages, there can often be very intense local debate among the community as to whether this is more or less important than the value to tourism and general interest that comes with having deer around for people to see.

There are relatively few access/deer conflicts now across the range of DMG areas, with particular incidents being the exception rather than the rule. This suggests that efforts to deal with such issues over the past 10 years or so have been relatively successful, but this is an area that requires constant attention and communications.

One issue that became more topical after the assessment process had started was the role that deer management groups could play in the management of wild fires, working with the Fire & Rescue Service, and making them aware of what equipment and personnel were likely to be available in different areas to help. Such a function could easily be included in any future assessment process, and is a very good example of a public interest already provided by many Groups.

Maximise economic benefits associated with deer

It was relatively easy to estimate the value of deer being culled within a particular area, with the value often being close to or exceeding £1 million per DMG annually. The value of wages to stalkers and other staff could readily be calculated as well, to give a feel for value to local communities. In most cases, this would be a similar amount.

Many Groups had a range of other activities going on which included deer, with wildlife watching/safaris growing in popularity. It was much more difficult to put a value on much of this as deer were only one component of interest to such

businesses, although they are undoubtedly a staple and reliable species of wildlife for many tours, which would struggle without them.

Minimise the economic costs of deer management

This section was particularly difficult to make a reasonable analysis for, and a number of consultants could not provide any more than a fairly superficial account of what was going on. This section would benefit greatly from more structure and guidance going forwards.

Ensure effective communication in deer management issues

The use of new websites has made a very significant difference to the range and quality of information that can be made available, and the simple availability of contact details will in itself be very useful to many people.

The experience in many areas is that the people with an interest in deer tend to already be engaged, but there have been a number of times when local people have come across DMG contacts online and made enquiries that were subsequently addressed, and this is particularly satisfying.

Ensure deer welfare at individual and population level

The vast majority of deer herds are well below carrying capacity in a normal year, and welfare concerns seldom arise in these situations. Any problems that do arise tend to be in very wet springs, when calf mortality can be high. In such circumstances, a debate can be had about the appropriate level of woodland cover, and what can be realistically provided. Much of the native woodland planting in the Highlands in recent years has been targeted at providing deer shelter in the future, and many owners will manage and restructure existing plantations for this reason as well.

Good larder procedures tend to pick up on any health issues. Many Groups could benefit greatly by collating and comparing individual animal cull data across all their properties, so that a better knowledge of ages, weights and fertility can be built up. Groups are always amenable to doing this, although the capacity needed to deliver on this is more of an issue.

When considering the deer densities that a range can sustain, it is worth noting the very significant sheep numbers that have disappeared from the Highlands in the last 25 years or so.

The following data demonstrates that over 400,000 ewes and 1 million sheep overall have disappeared since 1990, with the open range deer population, if anything, falling since then as well. Losses at a local level can be much higher, up to 60 per cent and beyond, and these type of changes need to be considered when deciding what levels of deer are appropriate in a locality. The Agricultural census data for sheep has been very good, and readily available at a parish level, and was very useful in informing the necessary background information for many deer plans.

Table 3 - Breeding Ewes and Sheep in DMG Area, June 1982 to June 2015

Breeding ewes and sheep in DMG area, June 1982 - June 2015				
	Breeding Ewes		Total Sheep	
	Holdings	Head	Holdings	Head
1982	5,958	986,943	6,189	2,192,432
1990	6,100	1,072,314	6,299	2,484,921
2000	4,857	960,016	5,111	2,213,283
2005	4,344	811,859	4,659	1,892,496
2010	3,802	638,022	4,281	1,523,583
2015	3,672	601,209	4,205	1,461,258
<i>Source: June Agricultural Census, RESAS</i>				

Note also that there are 2500 holdings less which have breeding ewes, and 2000 holdings less with no sheep at all. This is a very considerable decrease in economic activity and potential work opportunities in these areas, in addition to the likely effect that it will have on increased carrying capacity for other animals, especially deer.

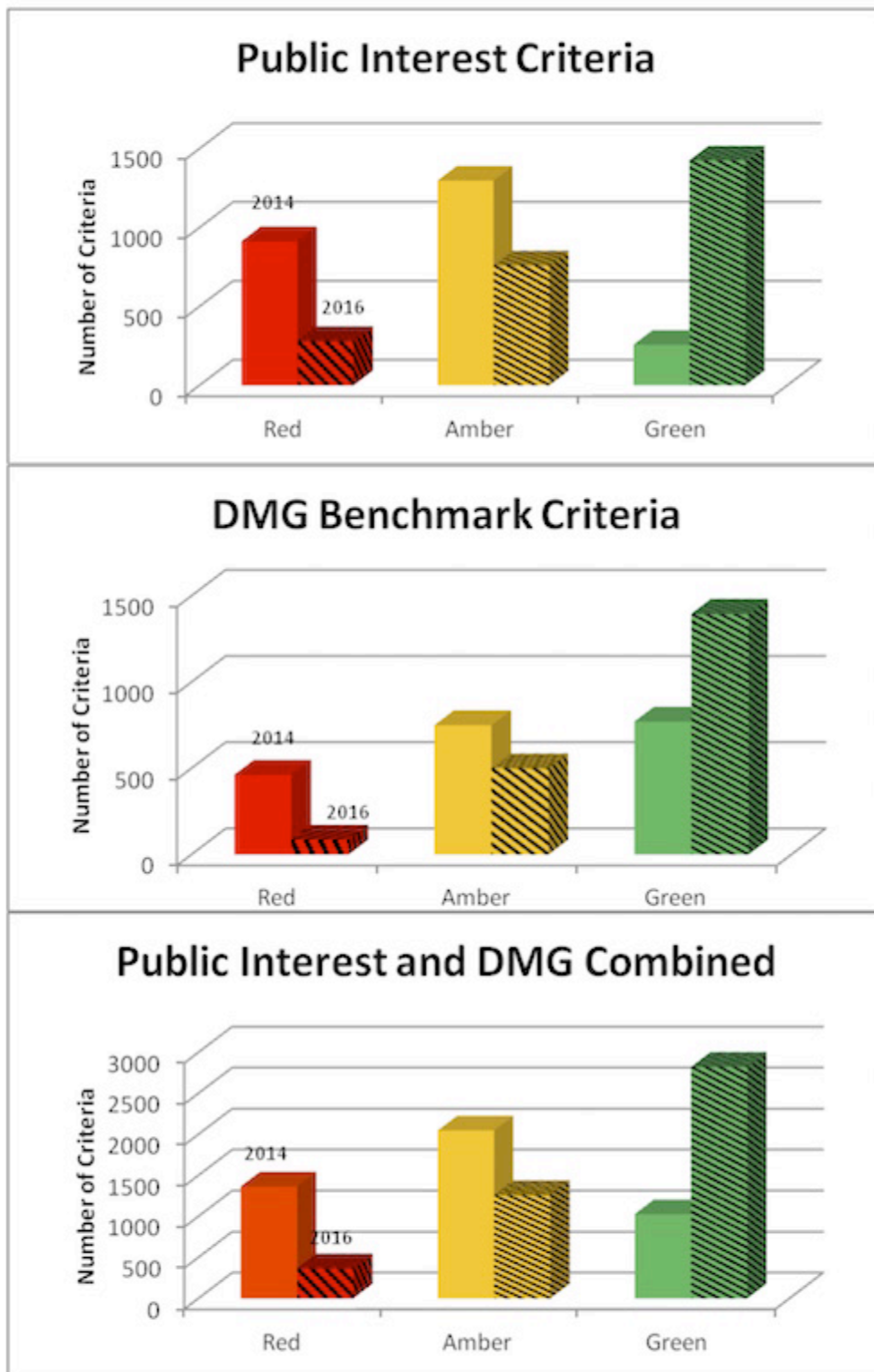
LOOKING FORWARD

This deer planning and assessment process has generally been a very good one, engagement has been forthcoming at all levels, and while parts of it may not be perfect, that must be regarded as understandable given the time pressures involved. It can never have been anticipated that all 44 DMGs would ever have been required to update their management plans on the same approximate timescale, putting huge pressure on consultants, SNH staff and other consultees. That was the situation that needed to be delivered between 2014 and 2016, but it took place within the allocated time available, Government provided the necessary level of funding, and SNH re-allocated staff time to support the effort.

Significant progress has been made, and that is documented elsewhere in relation to individual public interests and aspects of how DMGs function. In some cases the progress has been more than others, and looking forward, we need to see why that is. Some suggestions have been made in this paper, but there will be other feedback as well.

In terms of individual DMGs, the data below has been calculated by apportioning scores to the colours awarded, totaling them up, and turning them into a % figure.

Table 4 - Movement in criteria scores between 2014 and 2016 assessments



For both the Benchmark and Public Interest assessments, it can be seen very clearly that higher numbers of DMG areas are located in the higher scores in 2016 than in 2014. In both there is a little bit of a tailend, but in some of these there are specific reasons for that. While some of the above scores represent actual improvement over the period, especially in relation to how groups actually operate and communicate, much of the improvement is down to documenting what Groups are actually doing in a way that was not necessary before, and the planning exercise has allowed many of the public interest areas to be properly analysed and evaluated for the first time.

In terms of individual criteria assessed, the charts above demonstrate the level of improvement that has occurred. The proportion of criteria assessed as Red in 2014 has reduced from 31 per cent to 8 per cent (with a quarter of the remaining Reds attributable to just two DMGs), and the proportion assessed as Green has increased from 23 per cent to 63 per cent. The proportion of Amber criteria has decreased from 46 per cent to 28 per cent.

This type of analysis, above, implies that a quality assurance scheme should now be developed, and there have been extensive discussions within ADMG about how this might take place. SNH is aware of those discussions.

Involving the environmental NGOs in the development of such a scheme would greatly strengthen the process, and this would also make right the oversight made in 2014 when they were not involved in the development of the current assessment process.

As for practical issues going forwards, each DMG now has an extensive, working DMP or equivalent document that they will need to deliver over the next 5 - 10 years. In many cases, the actions they have agreed to take on are ambitious. They will require support, and that may be difficult at a time of financial cutbacks. The time commitments required will be considerable, but the advances in deer management over the past 20 years or so, such as training, Best Practice, and Scottish Quality Wild Venison accreditation have all taken place with estates and Government agencies working together to deliver positive change, and the improvements in designated sites have also been a result of commitment from both parties.

It is hoped that this outlook will still continue after the current SNH Review.