

ADMG AGM

Chairman's Report to the AGM – 28 February 2019 – Richard Cooke

Welcome

This year, you will be pleased to hear, I can keep this report a little shorter as we have now published an Annual Review which you will find together with the new issue of Scope, which is on your chair.

As I have said in the Annual Review, 2018 has largely been **a year of work behind the scenes**, both closely with individual DMGs, and in particular with SNH on the detail of the Assessment process which is now becoming standardised as the key performance indicator for DMGs. Although the 101 criteria have not changed, the system has needed some refinement on the 2016 model to achieve clear definitions and that has been the substance of our ongoing discussions with SNH. Our determination is to avoid surprises in the 2019 Review. In particular we needed to have a better understanding of what SNH are expecting of each DMG in terms of habitat impact assessments, woodland expansion, native woodland, deer welfare and deer related economics.

These discussions are ongoing and are based on the assumption on both sides that SNH and Scottish Government expectations must be reasonable and deliverable in the relatively short timescale since 2016, while acknowledging that there will be plenty more to do before the 2022 Review. It would be naive to think that the bar will not continue to rise but the response of DMGs to rapid change in the ground rules over recent years gives me confidence that we can meet all reasonable expectations in future.

On the subject of Assessments, to which we will be returning in detail later this afternoon, can I please make the point that these will form the basis of judgement by SNH of where the deer sector stands at two levels. Firstly, each DMG will be assessed on its own position in relation to the 101 criteria as it was in 2016 and this will determine your place in the SNH league table of Group performance. Secondly and equally importantly, SNH will use the aggregated results of the Assessment across all DMGs to report to Government on the performance of the upland red deer sector as a whole. This is clear from the letter sent round all Groups by SNH dated August 2018. So, from the ADMG perspective every green at individual DMG level contributes to the demonstration of progress by us all, every red to the contrary. My point of course is that how each DMG scores locally affects us all nationally. United we stand, divided we fall.

I am very aware that all of this has stretched the capacity of Groups to do all that is now expected of them. Smaller Groups particularly struggle with this. With that in mind there will be a time and cost case study presentation from Tom Chetwynd later this morning. A lot is asked of us and very often it is ADMG as much as SNH which is pressing, but this is not an escalator which we can step off and it is pleasing to see Groups mostly embracing the challenge.

We have also supported individual DMGs with advice where asked to do so in addressing internal issues, in a few cases providing a short-term external Chair. New DMGs continue to emerge and start the deer management planning process and ADMG has a number of new members.

Another emerging picture is the expansion of the area covered by collaborative management and ADMG has assisted potentially conflicting interests, farmers, foresters, game keepers and community representatives in coming together to address a shared problem, mostly at the simple level of first getting the deer population under control. Examples are in mid Aberdeenshire and South Argyll and there are more in the pipeline. There has also been a good initiative in the Dunkeld area in which ADMG has not been directly involved but which I thoroughly commend.

At least so far as red deer management is concerned, no-one here will need persuasion that **the best way is the collaborative way**, under the voluntary principle. It is therefore pleasing to see that approach applied in a steadily expanding area, well beyond what we still refer to as the 'deer forests'.

This afternoon there will be a short **seminar** looking forward to the SNH Assessments. In addition to hearing from SNH, this will include presentations from Victor Clements and Linzi Seivwright on the headline results of the DMG health checks carried out by various private consultants on behalf of ADMG last autumn. This has been informative for us in establishing the general state of the DMG sector in terms of measurable progress, but it has also hopefully helped to identify for individual DMGs where there are further marks to be gained. The seminar will look more closely at the areas where there is potential for increasing the number of greens and reducing the number of ambers and reds between the time of your health check and the SNH Assessment in less than two months time.

There was a **record red deer cull** in 2017, a total of just over 75,000 red deer was accounted for. We have taken the trouble to comment that this record probably represents a high point in the cull, both as a consequence of a number of substantial reduction culls, mostly now complete, ongoing heavy culls in forestry, and because the red deer population is now acknowledged, not least in the James Hutton Institute Report to SNH last year, as having peaked and now trending down overall. The relatively heavy mortalities of the 2017 winter and the ongoing implications for recruitment in 2018/19 and 2019/20 are also a factor.

I have said in my piece in Scope that, it now being standard practice to review and adjust DMP population models annually, target cull setting and allocation among DMG members must continue to be standard practice and evidence based. The *mark one eyeball*, the experienced eye of the professional stalker, continues to be critical in terms of recording mortalities, calving and deer condition.

If I could just talk for a moment about our **communications**. One or two Groups or individuals have suggested that ADMG communication at individual deer manager level could be improved and, taking this to heart, we have had a thorough review of our communications arrangements which currently include:

- **Scope**, our hard copy Newsletter, which comes out at this time and to coincide with the GWCT Scottish Game Fair at Scone, two issues a year. This is intended to report on work in progress and in prospect and goes to all Member Groups and multiple other interests including MSPs.
- We also issue an **E-Scope** online on a frequent basis whenever there is anything of particular note to be advised to members. Ideally this should reach every DMG member if they have signed up for it.
- For both Scope and E-Scope we do not necessarily have direct individual contact with all the individuals involved in the DMG sector and the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 substantially curtailed our database. We do therefore absolutely depend on DMG Secretaries ensuring that all our

publications and online communications reach all Group members with encouragement to read them. Most Secretaries are brilliant at this but there may be just a few exceptions.

- I mentioned just now that we are introducing an **Annual Review** which is really a report on activities during the previous year, and as I say, it is on your seats and I will let it speak for itself and do please let me have feedback if you feel it can be improved upon in any way.
- There is of course also the ADMG web portal www.deer-management.co.uk and this has over the last few weeks been thoroughly updated and revised. I would remind you that, through the map on the homepage, there is a link to every DMG with its own website or to a dedicated page and this has proved an efficient and invaluable mechanism in meeting the expectation of which we are continually reminded by SNH and the Scottish Government, that of reasonable transparency in the public interest. As with all websites, these are only as good as their content and need to be kept constantly up to date.

Nothing reflects so badly as an out of date website. Dick Playfair co-ordinates the web portal and can, if requested, update individual DMG websites, add new documentation such as deer management plans, minutes, agendas etc but we need you to come to us. Dick tells me that a large proportion of DMG sites are not in fact up to date and this needs to be addressed by every Group as it is the difference between a red and green on that criteria when SNH do their Assessment this Spring. Do please follow this up. Have a word with Dick today and make the necessary arrangement with him.

- We do have a Twitter presence but to date have not used **social media** very much, having more targeted methods of internal communications and seeing little value to the DMG world in engaging in the hurly burly of online outrage. Rightly or wrongly we don't see ourselves as that sort of organisation. It would be useful to have comments on this approach and on whether members make use of social media when we come to questions later on.
- Beyond the above ADMG Executive Committee regional representatives attend **DMG meetings** whenever possible and I think that works reasonably well in most cases, and I am always happy to attend meetings myself on request. Further suggestions on communications welcome.

The **Deer Working Group**, very sadly now without its Chair, Simon Pepper, who died in the autumn, will be moving towards the conclusion of its deliberations and preparing its report to the Scottish Government. At this stage there is really no indication of what the outcome of this may be in terms of recommendations for change which were a requirement of the Group's remit. Whatever they are they will be taken forward along with the SNH Review, and considered together by the Cabinet Secretary and, doubtless by the Environment Climate Change and Land Reform Committee at Holyrood.

There has been a lot going on in the **venison** world this year partly as a result of the 2016 E-coli incident and follow up discussions with Food Standards Scotland but equally importantly on the further development of the venison market, efficiency improvements in the venison trade and generally making the most of our valuable product. I will say no more about this just now as Dick Playfair will give a full report on this, on the Government initiative and on the further evolution of the Scottish Venison Partnership.

The sporting **rates** story continues to run, and many deer forest appeals have been submitted to the various local authorities and are progressing. Not many final outcomes are yet known and the first appeals in the Highland Council area which called in December have been carried over. Other local authority areas are also now setting appeal dates. My guess is that in most cases ongoing negotiations are likely to be informal with the Appeal procedure as a backstop if required. We will have to wait a little longer to see any sort of pattern emerging and to see how Regional Assessors are allowing for local factors such as remoteness. Until we know all that it will be difficult to assess the overall impact on the deer sector. Consideration should be given to having professional advice and support in the Appeal process.

At last year's AGM we heard from Winston Churchill who had potentially been very much disadvantaged by the new rating arrangements and, as things stood then, would probably have had to close his business. I think some progress has been made from his point of view and certainly his case was taken into account by the Finance Secretary, resulting in a Scottish Government advice note to local authorities suggesting the use of vacant property relief where there is no sporting aspect to deer control. We know that some local authorities are acting on this guidance and that some are not and there is a strong need for a consistent approach across all local authority areas. As ADMG representative on the Scottish Land & Estates Sporting Rates Working Group I can say that this point is being strongly made but the local authorities need to be dealt with individually on this and members should where possible take this actively forward themselves taking advice from us as required. I should like to express my thanks to Winston for offering his case to challenge the weakness of the initial arrangements.

I am pleased to tell you that **WDBP** has entered into a new lease of life after some years in the wilderness. It has an energetic new Chair, Doug McAdam, and is now supported by way of a joint arrangement with the England and Wales Deer Initiative, whereby the Guides are developed and, where necessary revised, by the DI Officer Jamie Cordery. Linzi Seivwright, who wrote many of the original guides in her previous role with SNH represents ADMG on the WDBP steering Group.

I have mentioned in Scope that we are at the start of discussions with SNH in regard to trying to quantify in economic and social terms the positive and negative **impacts of deer on a local economy** at DMG level. This is particularly relevant where land management actions on some landholdings within an area may be having an effect on others and where there is a need to have a systematic approach as to the costs and benefits of change in economic and social as well as environmental terms.

I would like to talk about **money** for just a moment. Finlay will be taking us through the Annual Accounts shortly. Let me say first that we are not proposing to increase subscriptions this year which will be our third at the current level.

Three years ago we ran a Project Fund Appeal and raised around £35,000 by way of a number of generous mostly one-off donations and the money raised, along with drawing down some of our reserves, has enabled us to fund the Health Checks in 2018. 43 DMGs took up the offer and our costs, still coming in, will amount to over £40,000. From all the feedback received that has been money well spent. The Health Checks have really helped Groups to focus on what they have to do to score well in the SNH Assessment process.

Our very strong recommendation is that Groups should arrange to have the consultant who did their Health Check, at the Assessment meeting with SNH to ensure that the Assessment reflects the reality of where your DMG has got to. That being so we have put aside a small additional fund to enable Groups to have that expert support.

I do not anticipate that all Groups will need to access this fund as many of the bigger ones now have a retained consultant who will be involved in any case, but for the smaller Groups we will make a figure of £250 available to help meet the cost of a consultant's time at the Assessment meeting. If this is of interest please contact Finlay, Tom or myself direct by email and we will set it up.

Although we are able to make this new offer, our fighting fund is now pretty well drained and we will therefore need to invite donations again and propose to do so over the coming months. The three yearly Scottish Government review this year is going to take a lot of time and effort on the part of ADMG and others and we need to have something in reserve. Any offers will be very much appreciated and for those so inclined do perhaps have a word over lunchtime.

To conclude my Annual Report to you, and in summary, it is my view, borne out by most of the health check results, but noting that there is still work to do in some areas, that the deer sector has continued to make remarkable progress in developing structured, evidence-based deer management and that, as a profession, I use the word advisedly, we can demonstrate a strong and positive direction of travel which takes account of public as well as private interests, as is reasonably expected of us. There are one or two DMGs that may still need a little extra support, dare I say, a greater sense of urgency, but, generally, we are in good shape - but there are no grounds for complacency.

I would also make the point that for some, including some in government, sustainable deer management always seems to be about "less deer". We must challenge this when we are confronted with it. As the JHI report to which I referred earlier shows, we have checked the upward trend and, with continuing DMP based culling targets, are now reducing the national red deer population. There is still work to do in the remaining S7 areas and where deer are doing serious damage to farmland and forestry but by and large we are on top of our responsibilities.

Sweeping generalisations are to be avoided but there is no logical reason that numbers should not be allowed to increase in circumstances where deer are living well within their means without negative impacts on their habitat, their welfare, or other land management interests. What we have achieved together over the years in our new generation DMPs is a rigorous, evidence-based approach to establishing where that complex and subtle balance lies. And we continue to make progress - more refinement, more knowledge, more skills.

We manage a wild species and can never control all the factors, particularly weather, so natural mortalities will occur from time to time despite our best efforts and are not an indication, as I have heard suggested recently, of a failure of management. Even pampered lowland sheep in grass fields find ingenious ways to die prematurely. What we are about, like the farmers, is husbandry, but with far less control of the variables. Increasingly we have a good story to tell and a level of wildlife management which should be a matter of national pride, in many ways unique in the world.

That is not yet the universal perception at Holyrood and ADMG's job during the forthcoming Review is to continue to make that very positive case on your behalf. We will be doing our level best and all I ask of you in your own DMGs and on your own properties is to work with others to score well in the Assessments and to show that what we have created together as a management system works at every level and in every locality. We are told, and SNH have established through their public surveys, that red deer are in the top three of Scotland's most iconic (I hate that word!) wild species. The logic is that those who look after them should be valued accordingly.

Finally, my thanks to the Committee.

I shall be happy to take any burning comments now on any of the above but there will be an opportunity for a broad ranging debate during the Panel Session at the end of the morning so do please keep any questions warm till then.