

ASSOCIATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT GROUPS ANNUAL REVIEW 2019/20



Photo: Neil McIntyre

DMGs PASS ANOTHER YEAR UNDER THE MICROSCOPE



Richard Cooke, Chairman
Association of Deer Management Groups

2019 has been our 'examination year.' The Deer Management Groups (DMGs) have once again been under the microscope, firstly in the third SNH Assessment process in spring 2019 which formed part of the SNH review report *Assessing Progress in Deer Management* submitted to the Scottish Government in the autumn. The parallel reporting exercise by the Government appointed Deer Working Group (DWG) *The Management of Wild Deer in Scotland* was written and presented during 2019, although not finally published until January 2020.

In summary, the SNH Report, which was about assessing progress made by the deer sector since 2016, was broadly favourable stating: "the overall impression is of an improving picture of deer management in Scotland." It reported a downturn in the overall red deer population to around 300,000 representing a density of 9.3 per sq km, a figure based on the 2017 study by the James Hutton Institute on behalf of SNH which attributed the reduction to culling effort. With more favourable climate factors it appears that, with high levels of recruitment and low natural mortality, a 20% cull is now necessary to maintain a stable population (not the old Red Deer Commission rule of 1 in 6), hence the 22% cull of recent years accounts for the overall reduction, albeit not in all localities.

The improvement in the performance of DMGs against the 101 Assessment criteria since 2016 was commended by SNH although it was rightly pointed out that the effect of reduced impacts may not be apparent in terms of vegetation change for some years. In addition, there is more to do in respect of native woodland condition. The rapidly increasing number of Peatland ACTION and woodland expansion projects, both major strands in the Scottish Government policy to address the climate emergency, was also noted.

The Deer Working Group was set up with a different purpose, namely to review the **system** of deer management and "make recommendations for changes to ensure effective

deer management in Scotland, safeguard public interests and promote sustainable management of wild deer." Strangely, the two reports do not sit well together with the SNH report recognising progress and the DWG report failing sufficiently to acknowledge it, while finding the present system inadequate and in need of radical change.

The DWG report is a remarkably comprehensive history of deer and deer management in Scotland. It discusses the role of the public agencies, sparing no criticism, particularly of SNH, and examines the way deer management is carried out in not only the red deer area but also lowland and near urban situations across the whole of Scotland.

While stopping short of recommending a full statutory system, it proposes that the voluntary approach be retained. It favours more of a policing role for SNH with greater reliance on the use of statutory measures where land managers fall short of "effective deer management." However, it is unclear how SNH would find the resources to monitor habitat impacts across the whole of Scotland so as to be able to judge whether deer management is "effective" or otherwise.

It contains 99 recommendations. While many of these are detailed proposals to rationalise and tidy up existing legislation into a new Deer Act, it also puts forward a number of more substantive changes. These include a significant refocusing of the role of SNH with a more regional approach, greater concentration of resources on lowland deer, and more effective information gathering, particularly in relation to lowland cull returns.

It also, somewhat surprisingly, proposes the cessation of routine deer counting by SNH in the DMG area recommending that deer impacts rather than numbers and densities should be the yardstick of effective deer management in future.

It nonetheless stipulates that a density of 10 red deer per sq km should be a set maximum (despite SNH having reported that the average is already below that threshold at 9.3).

ANOTHER YEAR... (CONTINUED)

It states that in future the deer management unit should be regarded as being at landholding level, this being where the responsibility for effective deer management lies, rather than at DMG scale. This seems to ignore the free ranging and herding behaviour of red deer which require a coordinated approach for effective management, which is, of course, the very basis of the DMG model. The Report also, in considering deer impacts still to be excessive, takes little account of other herbivores. There are two sheep for every deer in the area covered by the DMGs.

And another surprise, it proposes that the triennial deer reviews and SNH Assessments should cease.

While the recent marked progress of DMGs is acknowledged, the DWG Report also points to other models for co-ordinating deer management with greater emphasis on having dedicated, deer only, SNH staff who would set up regional Deer Panels to support deer management at local level. Shades of the old DCS! However, these panels should include only public sector representatives, without practitioner representation, which seems very wrong headed.

The Report also directs attention to a possible future mechanism involving "a hunting permit" and "cull approval system." Finally, it recommends replacement of all the existing legislation with a new Deer (Scotland) Act.

There is much to think about in terms of this report but ADMG considers that it may be criticised for focusing almost exclusively on the costs and the negatives associated with deer without giving equal or balanced attention to the benefits. It makes little reference to the value of deer to Scotland in terms of jobs, economic benefit (such as venison sales or stalking lets), communities and tourism. It also fails to adequately acknowledge the present direction of travel which, as reported by SNH separately, is firmly in the right direction and should, if present momentum is maintained, deliver "effective deer management" in future without such radical and disruptive change.

There is no substitute for reading both of the above reports and it is important for all deer managers to do so, particularly in light of the fast changing priorities for all land management which are now trumped by the climate change imperative. At the time of writing, both reports remain under consideration within the overall context of the Scottish Government deer sector review, which is ongoing. ADMG is closely involved in representing the interests of the DMGs and their members in that process and we will keep you informed.

ASSESSING PROGRESS IN DEER MANAGEMENT



Robbie Kernahan,
Head of Wildlife Management, SNH

As I have written before, we are never far away from the next review relating to the management of Scotland's nature and uplands

- those reports are coming in thick and fast at present. Our report to Scottish Government *Assessing Progress in Deer Management 2019* was published in November and provides an update to our previous review in 2016 with a particular focus on approaches to protecting the public interest.

Our overall view is of an improving picture. Red deer populations have been stable since 2000 and there are early indications of an overall decrease in population density with marked reductions in some regions. DMGs now cover a greater proportion of the red deer range, with significantly improved management plans and associated improvements in DMG performance. In the last three years we have developed a better understanding of deer management in lowland areas and agree with the Lowland Deer Panel's conclusion that existing structures are largely fit for purpose and that the need for collaboration varies with circumstances.

We highlight that natural heritage interests should remain the focus for many deer managers and there are still outstanding concerns associated with the delivery of Scottish Biodiversity Strategy targets for native woodland condition and restoration.

The DMG Assessment process which has figured large in all our lives for the last year, forms an important part of the report. We acknowledge the significant improvements made and recognise the hard work and time that has gone into delivering those. SNH staff involved in the process remarked that DMG engagement, whilst sometimes challenging of SNH views, was very positive and constructive. We credit the preparatory work done by ADMG through the health checks and the support given to individual groups by ADMG

and SNH staff with helping to clarify expectations and deliver this uplift in performance.

Whilst highlighting the improvements in plans, the report also identifies that as yet there is less evidence for change on the ground. However, we do recognise that inevitably there will be a time-lag between developing plans and their implementation through specific projects on the ground. We point to the need to monitor delivery on the ground going forward.

By the time this article is published, the Deer Working Group report will also have been published. SNH has had sight of it and, over the coming months, we will be considering the recommendations and our advice to Scottish Government. The DWG report makes criticism of SNH that we will need to reflect on and respond to.

Our assessment of an improving picture does not necessarily conflict with the view of others that there is still some way to go to deliver fully sustainable deer management that adequately protects the range of public interests.

The public policy context is changing with a greater awareness of the challenges posed by climate change and biodiversity loss. Whilst deer management has been the subject of increased scrutiny in recent years this focus is now falling across land management sectors in order to make the transformational changes required of all of us. Our report signals that the deer sector is now well placed to respond.

We won't all support all of the contents of the reports and prospectuses emerging from different interest groups, but SNH welcomes the current focus given to deer management and recognises there are areas of common ground. To this end a new task group instigated by ADMG and Environment LINK is being set up to work collaboratively and develop joint approaches to climate and nature challenges. We would urge that, despite SNH's favourable view of progress, this is not a time for complacency, but instead to continue on the journey of improvement.

ADMG survey will help inform future priority areas for supporting Deer Management Groups



Dr Linzi Seivwright

An on-line survey was conducted by the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) from August 2019 with the aim of assessing the challenges faced by Deer Management Groups (DMGs) and to help identify and prioritise areas of future work.

Established in January 1992, today ADMG's membership includes 45 DMGs covering almost 3.2 million hectares of red deer range (40% of Scotland). These Groups vary considerably not just in the size of the areas they cover (from 13,000ha to over 175,000ha) and their geographical location, but also in the broad range of management objectives they incorporate. The role of ADMG is to provide a number of key functions to its members including representation to Government, liaison with Agencies and other organisations, as well as providing guidance and advice directly to DMGs. The challenge for ADMG is how best to support the diverse needs of its members, to enable them to effectively deliver collaborative, sustainable deer management, in a rapidly evolving policy landscape.

Since 2014, DMGs have faced intense scrutiny by Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. Scottish Government Land Use and Biodiversity Strategies, as well as ambitious climate change targets, all place a responsibility on the deer sector to play its part. As a result, the demands and expectations on DMGs to deliver the public interest through Deer Management Plans have increased and ADMG is aware that as well as providing leadership, the organisation has to continue to adapt to reflect and support the changing needs of its membership.

The survey set out 14 questions asking for feedback on the organisation's activities to date, as well as identifying where ADMG should focus future work priorities. Questions also focussed on the effectiveness of ADMG's communication strategy and how well members felt that the organisation represented their concerns.

Key areas covered in the survey were:

- ADMG Health Check and DMG Assessment process: was this a good way of measuring performance, were they useful and how could processes be improved in the future?
- The effectiveness of the various types of media that ADMG uses to communicate with members such as newsletters and meetings
- The value of the ADMG website and individual DMG pages
- Training needs and requirements for Groups and Group Members, particularly Chairs and Secretaries
- The effectiveness of ADMG's representation to and engagement with Government
- Feedback identifying what sort of resources DMGs currently require and what types of funding would be attractive to DMGs in the future.



Photo: Neil McIntyre

A full summary of the results is available on the ADMG website. ADMG is grateful to all those who completed the survey, for the considered and constructive feedback and particularly to those who took the time to provide detailed additional comments. With the publication of the SNH Review and the Deer Working Group Report, it is envisaged that 2020 and beyond will be a busy and challenging time for deer management.

In these times of inevitable uncertainty ahead, ADMG will continue to champion the important role that Deer Management Groups have in the management of rural Scotland and will endeavour to ensure that the valuable contribution that they make is recognised and is supported. ADMG encourages and welcomes feedback from members at any time, but this survey has been particularly useful at this juncture and will help provide valuable direction and focus to ensure that the voices of our membership are heard.

Dr Linzi Seivwright is principal of Caorann Consultants and a member of ADMG's executive committee

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Wild Deer Best Practice – very much alive and kicking



Doug McAdam,
Chair, Wild Deer Best Practice

“Change is a constant” they say, well the deer management and indeed land management sector is no exception to this. Last autumn Scottish Natural Heritage’s (SNH) report into the effectiveness of deer management in Scotland was published, and the various sector bodies including ADMG responded to this. The general tone was that good progress was being made, however we could all do better in certain areas. As I write this article, the long awaited Deer Working Group report has just been published with many more recommendations for change. I will refrain from commenting here on what the report says, or more interestingly maybe what it doesn’t say, as that is a job for others. But I certainly welcome the clear recognition in the report of the important role of Wild Deer Best Practice (WDBP) with both specific recommendations on focus areas and a recommendation for strong continued involvement of SNH. WDBP will continue to digest the report and discuss the findings with SNH and industry to provide fit for purpose guidance as needed.

Looking back, WDBP has been with us since the early 2000s, an immense amount of investment in terms of time, work and money has gone into bringing it to where it is today. Its reputation – and use - extends into Europe and well beyond and it is held in high regard. WDBP exists to help practitioners be sure they are acting humanely, responsibly and effectively, carrying out their activities in a rational and considered way based on the best, current information.

Returning to its basic premise, WDBP was set up to safeguard public safety; to ensure food safety; and to take full account of deer welfare as we go about our business of wild deer management. This has not changed and remains the core purpose of WDBP to this day. So where is WDBP now? I am sure we all remember the big set piece free to attend multi-day WDBP events laid on by SNH in the early days, which attracted stalkers from the length and breadth of Scotland. Also, the big folders of all WDBP guides provided at next to no cost. But times, public funding budgets and technology inevitably change and the deer sector and WDBP is not immune from that.

So WDBP has changed too, but it is still very much alive and kicking. It takes the form of 101 guides, all of which are now on the WDBP website in a free-to-access easily downloadable and printable form. This replaces the much sought-after hard copy/folder, but times and technology have moved on. We now look online for everything and publishing online brings major cost savings also.

What is crucially important is that for best practice in any field to be most effective it has to be really “owned” and driven by the industry themselves. Hence WDBP is overseen by a steering group made up from representatives of the main organisations in the wild deer sector: SNH, ADMG, BDS, BASC, SGA, SACS, Forestry Scotland, Forestry & Land Scotland, LINK/National Trust for Scotland, LANTRA, the Deer Initiative (which also distributes WDBP under its banner south of the border) and the rural colleges.

These are the key partners whose members and employees undertake deer management across Scotland. The role of the WDBP steering group is to provide governance and technical expertise, to actively promote WDBP to their respective constituencies and memberships as well as wider audiences, to



Photo: Neil McIntyre

develop, review and agree content for existing and new guides, to recommend topics for new guides, and to have collective ownership of the project and its activities, including holding WDBP focused events for their memberships and employees.

Given the current climate and the spotlight on wild deer and their management it is plain to see that Best Practice in deer management has never been more important and new issues and emerging responsibilities reinforce that – the Defra consultation on trophy imports and exports, the need to manage not just deer but other ‘wild’ species such as feral pigs and feral goats, and the absolute requirement that the sector is not just doing its job to the highest standards, but is seen to be doing so.

Social media and a number of strong campaigning voices using its channels to great effect can potentially make the lives and work of those in the deer management sector increasingly difficult unless everything we do is underpinned by Best Practice.

The workload for WDBP is a full one. There are new guides to produce, an ongoing review of existing guides to ensure they are up to date with legislation and fit for purpose and, following the recent reports mentioned earlier, I expect new areas of guidance to require development and publication. We also need to build a programme of events and opportunities at which WDBP can be showcased, where new aspects of it can be demonstrated, and we are looking for steering group members to take this forward. Whilst the days of the big set piece events are in the past, WDBP still needs to be out there and visible among not just its constituents but the public also, and we welcome the platform at Scone offered by the ADMG to showcase WDBP on their stand. It would be great if DMGs across Scotland could embrace this and hold their own Best Practice sessions for their DMG members which WDBP could support.

Communications and social media are crucial, so the WDBP landing page is where we would like to drive traffic, and our member organisations can help with this. Promoting the WDBP message is a collective responsibility.

There is much to do, but WDBP most definitely has not gone away – if anything it has moved with the times and has now taken a slightly different form. It remains an essential line of positive strength for the sector but in reaching out and engaging with our main audience, the practitioners, we must not forget the importance of engaging the wider public also. And there are other areas where we need to build bridges – with the venison sector (we are after all in the food business), with tourism, with other rural initiatives such as Moorland Forum and Wildlife Estates Scotland.

We have a proven, successful template and a product we can rightly shout about – so looking to the future it will be on the basis of joining the dots and not reinventing the wheel.

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