

## **ADMG Chairman's address**

### Scottish Parliament event 3 March 2020

Welcome.

Thank you to the Minister and Stewart Stevenson MSP as sponsor and host of this evening's event.

Background: there are 50 DMGs, ranging from 50,000 – 250,000ha and 3 to 50 members. Covering about 45% of Scotland, 3.2m ha. They have existed from 1960s to present day.

Mainly for the management of red deer.

Collaboration is vital as DMGs cover an increasingly diverse range of interests.

It is no exaggeration to say that deer management has been undergoing an almost revolutionary degree of change over last 10 years.

- Deer and their management attract intense interest and scrutiny – there are several points of view: stalking/hunting (worth £141m to Scottish economy; 2350 jobs, Pacec 2014); red deer a totemic symbol of Scotland (SNH Omnibus 47% “top of mind”); also perceived as a pest, or in certain quarters not to be managed/culled at all.
- Whereas deer management was considered just one of a range of rural land uses, from 2012 SNH commenced the presentation of deer management as a matter of public interest and as central to the environmental debate.
- System is underpinned by Wild Deer: A National Approach (WDNA) and the Code of Practice for Deer Management
- Upland sector has undergone a cycle of SNH Assessments both of function (ADMG Benchmark 45 criteria) and delivering the public interest, (56 PI criteria derived from the Code) public benefits including revenue, jobs, environment, venison, road safety etc.
- Scottish Government 3 yearly reviews of deer management in 2014, 2016 and 2019/20.
- Now climate change is ‘front and centre’ for deer management.
- All-in all, it is an opportune time for this event.

As part of this year's Review there was:

The SNH report *Assessing Progress in Deer Management*, presented in September 2019 and published before Christmas. Following a mixed report in 2016, acknowledging some early progress by DMGs but not enough, we were challenged to deliver a “step change”. In 2019 the report stated: “the overall impression is of an improving picture of deer management in Scotland,” and I have been verbally assured that that does amount to a “step change”. In fact, it is a comparatively encouraging report for us in the deer sector, noting significant improvement in the performance of DMGs alongside a **reduction in the red deer population** to around 300,000 following record culls, and a density of below 10 per s. km for the first time since the 1980s. The reduction in the population since 2000 is estimated to be 9% and red deer are the only species in Scotland considered to be declining, due to sustained culling.

Incidentally there are also around 600,000 breeding sheep in the red deer area; so a ration of 2 sheep: 1 deer; there are also hares, rabbits, and feral goats so *herbivore impacts* are not just about deer.

And most recently published, the report of the *Deer Working Group* which was set up by the Cabinet Secretary after the 2016 Review. Its function was to consider the system of deer management in Scotland, rather than current performance as in the SNH Report, and also to make recommendations for improvements.

The DWG report runs to 374 pages and makes 99 recommendations and is a very thorough piece of work. In our view it does, however, take a critical historic view of deer management and gives little cognisance to recent change and progress. We have recently submitted our detailed comments, on each recommendation, to the Cabinet Secretary copied to the ECCLR Committee.

Thus, we have two contemporaneous reports on the deer sector which rather conflict in their findings. So far as the SNH Report is concerned we think it is a fair reflection of where we are at the moment – a wholly new, public interest driven approach has now bedded in and DMGs, which have put a great deal of effort into responding to the expectations placed on them, now have detailed deer management plans, comprising deer population targets with cull plans, accessible on line through individual websites, and most are now carrying out their own Habitat Impact Assessments. As SNH reasonably points out it is premature to see any change in habitat condition as a result of reduced deer impacts but change is slow in such exposed high altitude locations and it will come.

As I said the DWG report has a different purpose. In particular it represents an encyclopaedic account of how present legislation, which is complex and not always coherent and consistent, has evolved. The recommendations are a mix of evolution and revolution and without going into detail, a few of these ADMG will oppose, but mostly not.

What we do find somewhat surprising is that it looks ahead to a somewhat ‘top down’ approach which perhaps sits ill with the commendable policy in Scotland of empowering communities and individuals. Actually, DMGs, which are increasingly inclusive, are quite a good and proven mechanism for such delegation to the local level.

**Climate change** is of course the greatest challenge which we all face and this is an area where DMGs have a major role to play. The Scottish Government’s Peatland ACTION initiative and woodland expansion policy are intended to increase our carbon sequestration capacity on a massive geographical scale and most of Scotland’s peatlands and larger potential woodland sites lie within the areas covered by the DMGs, which are already working hard on this. To date 19,000ha of peatland restoration has been completed since 2012, with much more coming forward against the Government target of 250,000ha by 2032. In addition, woodland expansion has amounted to some 33,350ha in the DMG’s area since 2008.

Our publication *Rising to the Challenge* envisages and promotes a future for deer management of which climate change remediation will be an integral part.