

ADMG – Virtual AGM – 16 July 2020

Chairman's Report

Welcome to this our first virtual meeting for members. We have all had to learn new communication skills over recent weeks. It was unfortunate that our original AGM date, on 18 March, fell just before the lockdown. I have no doubt in the light of subsequent events that we were right to cancel. While a virtual meeting is not a good substitute for our normal room full of members it seems unlikely that we will be able to meet again in 2020 and it is important that the AGM takes place. Hopefully by next spring we will be able to get together as normal.

One of the drawbacks of a large group meeting on Zoom is that it constrains audience participation, hence our request for questions in advance. You can also submit questions or comments during the meeting using the "Q & A" function on your Zoom screen. We will pull out a selection for putting to the Panel of today's speakers at the end of this session.

My full year report for 2019 which I would have presented to you in March is on the ADMG website, as is the 2019 Annual Review and the Minutes of the 2019 AGM so I will not go over the same ground in detail. The effect of coronavirus has been to bring some important matters, such as the Scottish Government review of the deer sector, to a dead stop while, at the same time, introducing a whole new set of challenges – great uncertainty as to the impact of the pandemic on the coming season – will we be able to have a let stalking programme? Will our regulars be able to come? How do we arrange safe accommodation for them? Will we have a market for our venison and at what price? We aim to summarise where we think we are with all of that over the next half an hour or so. You will also find hopefully useful commentary in the new issue of Scope which went on the website a few days ago; we are not producing a printed version as we normally do to coincide with Scone which has now been postponed until the beginning of October.

To touch briefly on the deer review, currently in limbo, as you all know this hangs on two reports which are strangely at odds with each other. Firstly, the SNH review following the DMG assessments last Spring is largely favourable, recognising the progress made by the sector since their 2016 report, while indicating, as we know, that there is more to do. It particularly notes the important part that the deer sector can play in addressing the "Climate Emergency" by continuing to take up opportunities for peatland improvement and woodland expansion, heavily funded by the Scottish Government, as well as ensuring that deer impacts remain low. On the other hand the Deer Working Group report, while it might be commended for proposing a rationalisation of the mish-mash of deer legislation, is backward looking and fails to recognise what has been achieved in recent years and appears to place little importance on collaborative management as represented by the DMGs, of which there are now some 50 covering almost half of Scotland.

What the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee and the Scottish Government will make of the conflicting messages of these two reports remains to be seen but, once they get back to it, ADMG will be emphasising the

positive SNH view and arguing against further change and the pressure from some for more intervention which the present direction and pace of travel would indicate to be unnecessary.

In May we carried out a survey to establish the impact of the coronavirus on deer managers and the likely effects on stalking income, cull plans and venison production. We had an excellent response to this and my thanks to all who participated. Dick Playfair will report on this survey in more detail and on the venison outlook when he addresses you shortly.

I would however just take the opportunity to caution against allowing the current crisis to distract from the necessity to take a normal cull this year, particularly the hind cull. The cull targets in your Group deer management plans need to be delivered as usual. From what I hear a high level of calving this summer will create upward pressure on the overall deer population and we must not lose the ground which has been hard gained over recent years by allowing numbers to creep up again. The credibility of our sector depends on that.

The SNH report recognises that the overall average density of red deer in the open range is below 10 per sq. km., with considerable local variances of course. As your Chairman, with the prospect of a grilling in front of the ECCLR Committee at some time later this year, I feel that that is a level of population which can be explained and defended. It is justifiable in terms of environmental impact and generally sufficient to ensure a sustainable stalking industry into the future with the employment and economic benefits that brings. In making that generalisation I am well aware that it is not easy for all of us. For some, concerns remain about public access for example, and many Groups include members with land management objectives which require widely different deer densities. That is always likely to be a characteristic of deer management and, because we have DMGs, these differences can generally be resolved and compromises be agreed between neighbours face to face. We remain under close scrutiny at Holyrood and in other quarters but I feel that, as a sector, we can rightly claim to be capable of resolving our own issues, while acknowledging our public accountability.

You will note that in my leader in the new issue of Scope I have referred to the need for Groups to respect and work with non-stalking members of DMGs. A few allegations of hostility to some forestry and conservation interest land managers at DMG meetings have been referred to us. It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that we are all on the side of sustainable deer management and equally that tensions between those with different but legitimate objectives requiring greater or smaller numbers of deer are inevitable from time to time, but such divisions can threaten the integrity of DMGs and of our now well crafted system of collaboration in sharing a common resource. I look to DMG Chairs to manage any differences which may arise.

Over recent months the UK and Scottish Governments have introduced a large number of business support measures but, in the Scottish version, very few of these have been available to land management businesses. We recently circulated a copy of the letter from the Scottish Government Finance Secretary in response to my request to look again at deer management businesses which did not qualify for most of the measures devised by Government to provide business support through the pandemic. A few may have been able to access some of these funds and loans but my impression from the responses to the funding question in our recent survey is that we have been left out in the cold. There is no logic for exclusion of land and deer managers and my conclusion is that it is simply discriminatory and reflects ingrained prejudice against private landownership and anything to do with it. In addition to raising it formally in writing I have also done so verbally at senior official level at our Holyrood event on 3 March and in various Zoom meetings with Ministers but the door is closed. We tried! Very disappointing!

Despite the lockdown leading to many cancelled meetings of the committees in which ADMG is involved, there has been much going on behind the scenes in addition to wrestling with the Covid support measures to which I have already referred. For one thing there was a flurry of activity around the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protection and Powers) (Scotland) Bill which threw up a third reading amendment by the Green Party to give mountain hares full protected status subject to SNH licensing for any management action. Astonishingly the Scottish Government supported it notwithstanding that mountain hare management is already under consideration in terms of the Werrity Report which stops short of recommending protection. This is an example of the worst of piecemeal law making under our Scottish system where narrow interest can bring forward proposals and introduce substantial change without any consultation with those affected or consideration of its implications, in this instance potential damage to woodlands and the environment generally. While this may not be central to deer management I wrote to the Rural Affairs Minister pointing out the contradiction between creating full protection for one upland grazing species, hares, while at the same time commissioning the Deer Working Group which has recommended removing close seasons for stags, ie removing present seasonal protection and varying close seasons for hinds. You may also have seen that letter on e-Scope.

We have considered carefully what help we can give to members in regard to how they conduct the coming stalking season with all the present uncertainties which face us. It would appear that, IF the present improving coronavirus situation continues, and having reached Phase 3 of the Scottish Government's lockdown relaxation plan, stalking should be possible in most situations. The provision of serviced accommodation for guests also looks possible now under most circumstances, hotel accommodation having been released as part of the reopening of tourism. In all respects the social distancing requirements, whether the prescribed distance remains at 2 meters or is adjusted down to 1, require careful thinking through.

The Scottish Government Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG) has developed generic advice for tourist facing businesses signposting specific sector guidance of which the recently published country sports paper is one example. This was developed jointly by a number of organisations of which ADMG was one. While this sets out broad guidance, more detailed thought is required as to how to conduct a stalking outing with a guest and how for example, in cases where staffed accommodation is provided, distancing can be ensured between guests and staff. ADMG has no expertise in this and individual businesses must make arrangements that suit them but I can perhaps just now suggest some areas to be thought about:

- Consider what advance information should be provided to guests before arrival as there are likely to be considerable differences from normal practices if they are regulars.
- Detailed risk assessments will be critical and should be made available to guests.

On accommodation:

- Consider asking guests to complete a health statement before arrival
- Perhaps ask arrivals to do a temperature check and maybe that should be a daily procedure during their stay
- Provide the means for hand hygiene
- Consider how cleaning can be done without contact between guests and staff.
- Consider how meals are to be served without contact.
- Think about deep cleaning between lets.
- Consider developing explicit procedures for house staff
- Consider safeguards for incoming staff, perhaps a quarantine or isolation period.

And on stalking outings:

- There are lots of potential points of contact or proximity on a stalking day – the handshake on arrival and departure, at the target, in the final stages of a stalk, dragging, loading a beast on a pony or into a vehicle, in the larder – and thought can be given as to how to avoid those, for example, perhaps no guests in the larder.
- Thought may also be required as to how to avoid contact with potentially virus contaminated surfaces, for example in a vehicle, using an estate rifle or passing a guest's rifle to him or sharing a piece.

I mention all these points and there will be many more. All situations are different and each business will need to pick up the potential risk areas in their Covid risk assessments and develop safe procedures that address those risks. Any potential new liabilities are a matter for individual insurance policies and I would suggest that insurers should be consulted.

The venison market is also a major area of uncertainty as we commence the new season. I am not going to say anything about that as Dick Playfair, in his capacity as Secretary of the Scottish Venison Association will do so in detail shortly.

Thanks to Committee etc.

All questions to panel at the end.