

The Voluntary Principle and why ADMG is important

Finlay Clark, Secretary, ADMG

Good afternoon.

In his opening remarks the Chairman confirmed that the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 had preserved the Voluntary Principle as the basis for Deer Management in Scotland – "despite much pressure from certain quarters to regulate".

When looking forward to the next review of legislation in 2015 it is sometimes useful to glance in the rear view mirror, just to check what the political landscape looked like the last time this principle and the management of wild deer in Scotland came under close scrutiny.

It is not always good to rake over old coals but – in presenting evidence to The Rural Affairs and Natural Environment Committee on 29th April 2010, the outgoing Chairman of The Deer Commission for Scotland stated "All the evidence that I have seen, and my experience of being Chairman of The Deer Commission for Scotland for *five* years, and Vice Chairman for six years before that, has shown that the Deer Management Group System does not work". He was not the only person who held that view. That was a view which was widely held within a number of organisations.

I have no doubt that if ADMG and the DMG System did not exist then the Voluntary Principle would very probably not have survived the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill and consultation process of 2009 and 2010.

Equally, it is not so long ago that many deer forests in Scotland were thought of as the personal fiefdoms of the owners and head stalkers. – I remember this particular sign being in use up until about 8 years ago.

Clearly both sides have moved some way towards the centre ground and by and large the Deer Management Group System which is currently in place works adequately well in most instances. I would also commend the work that has been done by Scottish Natural Heritage and The Forestry Commission in particular in moving the debate and environment within which deer management is discussed towards a more mature place. There are of course areas of tension and challenges but more often than not there is a willingness to find solutions.

But, and this is a big but, the Voluntary Principle will only and can only survive the test of time if participation within the Deer Management Group System is universally adopted. Land ownership and deer movements (within the red deer range) have consistently shown that unless your landholding is very large then it is almost impossible to achieve what you want without some form of collective cooperation with your immediate and wider neighbours. Size however is not always a guarantee and there are examples where management objectives have not succeeded on some of the largest individual holdings in Scotland because of conflicting neighbouring objectives.

There are many examples in Scotland where "going it alone" has not worked and in the process of trying many relationships severely tested by either "too many deer" or "too few deer".

For the Voluntary Principle, which is at the heart of the Deer Management Group System, to work then everyone must play a constructive role, be prepared to participate wholly, be prepared to communicate and at times be "prepared to compromise".

If the current Deer Management Group System fails then direct government intervention through statutory regulation is, in my mind, a given. You must remember that the Government will judge the success of the Deer Management Group System through delivery of public benefit. Understanding what is expected is key to delivery.

As we have heard from the Chairman, it is so far so good as far as Scottish Government is concerned, but there is much to do and we are being constantly monitored and increasingly so as we move towards 2015 and the review of current legislation. Engaging with Scottish Government on the management of designated sites is essential.

It may not happen in 2015 but if we collectively give the 'pro regulation' lobby enough ammunition they will eventually triumph. The SNP Government, despite its Referendum Agenda, has been pretty supportive to the rural economy, farmers and those involved in land ownership and management. A Labour Government, you can be pretty sure, will not be so considered where such matters are concerned. Dick Playfair has given a flavour of the direction of their thinking.

I know that there are many people in this room who have worked hard to support the DMG system and actively participate – equally there are some who view deer management as their 'own business'. If that remains your view after today then you not only threaten your own long term freedom to manage your deer and your land but also that of others.