

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Welcome to the 21st Annual General Meeting of the Association of Deer Management Groups.

We have had a busy year, in many ways a watershed year due to the Review by the Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs Climate Change and Environment Committee of Deer and the Environment. I will come back to this because it forms the main part of what I have to say this morning.

On the more routine business of the Association, the Executive Committee has met three times and has held regional meetings at Perth in March and Inverness in December. We also held our first London meeting in July with a view to establishing contact with Southern based deer forest owners who are rarely able to attend DMG meetings. This gathering, which was held at the London offices of Fleming Family and Partners was, I think, a notable success. It was well attended, we had about 50 people in the room, and what we had to say was well received. The programme over the course of the morning, in addition to presentations from myself and Finlay, a political analysis from Dick Playfair and a concluding question session chaired by Andrew Gordon, also included a presentation from SNH by Robbie Kernahan and Linzi Seivwright, and 2 DMG case studies. One of these was a presentation from David Lowes of Glenfalloch very similar to the excellent paper he gave to this meeting last year. The second was from Randal Wilson, Chairman of the West Ross Deer Management Group, another exemplary Group. We were asked by a number of those attending to repeat the event and we will probably do this, although not on an annual basis which would be rather more than our limited resources can stand.

I would also mention the successful Seminar held jointly with SNH at the Birnam Institute in March. This was specifically for DMG Office Bearers, Chairs and Secretaries, and the underlying theme was to emphasise the importance of effective leadership. This was done through a number of presentations including several case studies and then a workshop session and, again, those present, around 50, were complimentary about the value of the event and asked that it should be repeated and, indeed it is our intention to do so.

We have as usual been represented on numerous committees including the Scottish Venison Partnership, SQWV Ltd, Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group, the Deer Management Round Table, the Industry Competence Group, Best Practice Guidance, and the National Access and Moorland Forums. The Committee reports to follow will cover several of these. We had a useful meeting with the new Rural Affairs Minister, Paul Wheelhouse, in the Spring, and while we had no particular requests or demands at that time it was good to have the opportunity to brief him on the deer sector. I should also mention that we made submissions to the SGRPID SRDP review and responded to various consultations, including the SNH consultations on wild land and on hill tracks and we will be responding to the SRDP consultation by the end of this month.

And something for this year. We have jointly, with LDNS, commissioned a new PACEC economic study on the deer sector. We did this in 2006 and this has provided some very valuable figures on the economic value of stalking, (£105m; 2520 FTE) but this time we are asking PACEC to try to establish figures for the whole deer management economy across Scotland. As last time this will be a supplementary study on top of the UK wide study by PACEC funded by BASC, the Countryside Alliance and other organisations. I mention this because you will shortly be asked to participate in a questionnaire and I would urge you to do so as we find the economic argument in favour of deer management increasingly important at the political level, particularly at a time when SNH is looking to establish the economic and social as well as the environmental impacts of deer management.

In addition we have continued to be involved in casework with some individual DMGs. I do not propose to name them but one or two Groups have had to deal with some difficult matters this year and ADMG helps where it can. The Association can play a hopefully useful role as a mediator when internal conflict undermines the effectiveness of DMGs. We are very open to requests for help and please do not hesitate to be in touch with either myself or Finlay should the need arise.

We also launched the ADMG 'Principles of Collaboration' designed to encourage neighbourly cooperation within DMGs and you should all have seen this.

Now to move on to the Rural Affairs Committee Review. I am sure you are all aware of this. The ADMG written evidence has been available on the website since November and the link to the video record of the verbal evidence sessions has also been circulated.

The Review came about at the instigation of the RACCE Committee Convenor, Rob Gibson, MSP for Caithness, Sutherland and Ross, who took a personal interest in the situation within the Assynt sub group of West Sutherland Deer Management Group. The difficulties there have been covered in the media and I do not propose to go into detail now or to comment on the specific affairs of a member DMG. I am not sure if he fully knew what to make of the serious tensions that this unhappy situation created in the local community as well as in the DMG.

From what Mr Gibson said in a personal capacity, his view, which he was inclined to generalise to apply to the whole deer sector, was that the public interest in the environment was being damaged by ineffective deer management and that further regulatory measures might be necessary to put this right. Needless to say ADMG, which stands firmly for the voluntary principle, has a different view and made that clear in our written and verbal evidence and also in a prior meeting which I had at the Scottish Parliament with Mr Gibson and his Deputy Convenor, Graeme Dey.

The Hearings themselves were in my view conducted in a fair and balanced manner and the arguments both in favour of the voluntary principle and those in favour of more regulation were well aired. In addition the public agencies had an evidence session to themselves and gave due credit to the progress made by some DMGs while indicating that there is more to do.

Looking for the positives it was undoubtedly beneficial to be able to explain to the MSPs on the Committee the complexities of deer management and the practical difficulties and costs that could face a regulated system for all deer management throughout Scotland. Undoubtedly the level of knowledge across the Committee before the Review was low. Hopefully the point has been made that a one-size-fits-all approach to the deer sector would be very problematic.

The Committee published its recommendations to the Scottish Government earlier this month and although they prompted the usual media reaction in which deer are portrayed as the whipping boy for all the ills of the countryside, the recommendations were balanced and sensible and actually very similar to the Action Plan that ADMG has been developing over the last few months.

- They acknowledged that deer impacts are more important than numbers
- They enquired about the research into wider impacts of deer outwith designated sites and the effects of changing deer and sheep numbers on the natural heritage. *I was pleased that they had apparently picked up the point that we made that 275,000 open range red deer share their grazing with 2.5m sheep.*
- They recommended more work on the impacts of deer management on jobs and rural communities. *SNH is already working on this and our new PACEC study should provide some helpful information.*
- They asked for more information on deer in urban environments and on road networks. *It's good that they now know about the Lowland Deer Network and that it's not all about red deer in the Highlands.*
- They acknowledged that the Code is still new and that it is premature to judge its effectiveness but will continue to monitor this
- They proposed a review of the effectiveness of Section 7 Agreements and the workability of Section 8 which they recommend should now be used where voluntary agreement cannot be secured

So far so good. I see all of that as reflecting a growing understanding at Parliamentary level of the broad and complex issues surrounding deer management and an appreciation that sustainability is about a balance between environmental, economic and social requirements, and between private and public interests, which indeed is very much what the Code is about. However, the Committee goes on to say that:

- They consider that the progress of DMGs towards having effective and environmentally responsible Deer Management Plans (DMPs) is too slow but at least they acknowledge that progress is being made
- They set a deadline for ALL DMGs to have effective and deliverable DMPs - the end of 2016. That's two years.
- DMPs should be publicly available
- DMGs should be transparent and should include all relevant interests, including community interests, while recognising that some matters may appropriately be considered in private
- Finally the Committee undertakes to keep the progress of DMGs under review.

In the same week as the RACCE Committee reported, FCS published its Native Woodlands Report. This is a huge and valuable piece of work undertaken over several years and will doubtless be an important reference point for years to come. However, what was the headline? That deer are the single biggest threat to native woodland, and indeed it does say that, deep in the text of the 80 page Report. We have evidence to suggest that that statement is based on questionable analysis of the survey data and are pursuing that, but lets just say that it was another bad news day for deer particularly as it set the scene for the RACCE findings published 2 days later.

So that hopefully defines where we stand today, at this AGM.

The phrases “last chance saloon” and “wake up call” seem to occur quite often in deer sector dialogue and they have certainly been used at previous AGMs. I hope they are not overused because both are certainly appropriate on this occasion. The great majority of deer managers take their responsibilities very seriously and work hard to deliver them and most of us would just like to be left alone to get on with it. However deer management cannot be carried on by individuals acting in isolation. **Collaboration** is the name of the game and we need to get a lot better at it at a time when the difficulties of achieving it are increasing, and meeting public interest expectations is an increasing requirement.

Whether the criticism directed at the deer sector and the microscopic attention to what we do is justified or not, we must accept that we will continue to be under close scrutiny and that, in particular, the effectiveness of Deer Management Groups remains in question. There is a lot of politics about all this, but there it is and we cannot just bat the criticism away and carry on as usual. We must lead change and not be dragged along ever closer to a regulated system of deer management as is being advocated by some, not least in the Scottish Parliament. By this time next year, or the following year at the latest, I would like to be able to say publicly, and with conviction, that there is no better model of voluntary collaborative land resource management anywhere than the DMGs in Scotland, despite the real difficulties and internal conflicts that DMGs nearly all have to wrestle with.

On the FCS Native Woodlands Report I would particularly commend Alex Hogg's reference when interviewed to deer fencing, because very often, at local level, that is the battleground. It is undoubtedly true, we all know it, that where deer are present, even at quite low overall densities, well below the densities that many of us require to sustain stalking businesses and the jobs that they support, young trees will not thrive, or not without protection. Fencing is expensive but in many such situations it is the only alternative to large scale deer reductions, and it is relatively short term in the life of a forest. The public agencies accept this and regard fencing as a legitimate management tool but some others do not and we can only make progress with this intractable argument if there is a willingness to do so on all sides. It seems we are still a long way from that.

We hear a lot these days about the 'public interest' which has become one of those ill defined terms, used as a weapon by some to imply that they have a monopoly on the public interest, ie it is their way or no way. What we might take from the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act is that the strict public interest in deer management comprises human safety (principally about DVCs), food safety (venison) and deer welfare. In terms of the Code on Deer Management the 'public interest' also embraces impacts, both positive and negative, on the environment, on the rural economy and on people and employment. Most of the toxic debate which we have been hearing over recent months revolves around the different viewpoints as to where the balance lies between the three legs of that particular stool. It is a shame that we cannot have that reasonable discussion in a more constructive manner, and I can truly say that it is not for lack of effort or being reasonable on the part of ADMG. Actually I would suggest that for the most part the public interest and the private interest are inseparable. If we do not look after the deer range and the deer on it then the quality and value of those deer to us as a Nation declines.

Following the RACCE Review, we have had a series of meetings with SNH to develop our thinking on what we mean by "effective" Deer Management Groups, how we go about setting this as a standard, how we can support Deer Management Groups in reaching that standard and how we can measure our own progress. We are jointly developing a Collaborative Deer Management Project and I will leave SNH to provide the detail on this when they speak just after this.

I now wish to take the opportunity of announcing a new ADMG initiative, the launch of **The DMG Benchmark**. You can pick up a copy at the door at the end of the morning. This is a draft for consultation that I would ask all DMGs and individual members to take away and consider very carefully. Please submit written comments to the Secretary by Friday 18 April. It will then be amended to take your comments on board and considered further at this year's seminar for DMG office bearers in May before it is finalised and formally launched at the Scone Game Fair in July.

The Benchmark is intended to set the criteria that define an effective DMG. It will not be set in stone and it will evolve. While it is intended to put some flesh on the bones of the SNH Code, it is fairly general and further details will emerge in the course of this year and beyond. Its use by individual DMGs will involve some variation to reflect local circumstances, but all DMGs need to be in a position to tick every box to reach The DMG Benchmark as soon as they can, **ie by the end of 2016**, when, according to the recommendations of the RACCE Committee they will be judged on the delivery of their Deer Management Plans.

I am confident this is possible as a significant number of Groups already do so and many others are working hard in the same direction. Beyond 2016 maintaining that standard will be an ongoing task for all of us and ADMG will also work with SNH to extend the DMG coverage to areas where they do not presently exist but where there is a need for collaborative deer management.

So what do we specifically need to do to put this into practice? I do not wish to go through the Benchmark criteria one by one. Hopefully you will find them self explanatory and familiar; common sense in fact. But just to draw out a few key points:

Firstly, **leadership** within individual DMGs is critically important. A number of people here will have attended the Birnam Conference to which I referred earlier, last Spring. Every DMG needs a committed and energetic Chair and Secretary who can make some time available. It is really not just a “muggins turn” job.

Secondly, full **representation** and geographic coverage of the landholdings in a DMG area is essential. I know that a number of Groups have difficulty in gaining the support and involvement of all landowners in their area. We need to close these gaps and ADMG will, if necessary, support DMGs in approaching individuals who are not sufficiently supportive. Please ask if you need to - and I mean that. There is too much at stake here to allow uncooperative neighbours, regardless of their management objectives, to hold back the rest of us.

One of the criticisms levelled at DMGs during the RACCE Review is that they are not **inclusive**, and this was covered in their recommendations. I wrote in the Summer issue of Scope last year that DMGs need to consider all land managers who may become directly involved in deer culling. This includes farms and crofts on the periphery of Deer Management Groups but outwith the core boundary of the DMG, where deer may be culled as marauders during the winter and spring. The principle is that a DMG needs to cover the whole range of the deer population and engage all those who benefit from it or who experience crop or tree damage. How can we manage a population which suffers an unquantifiable and unselective annual “black loss”? I know that it will not be easy to get many farmers and crofters involved but we need to start that communication process.

ADMG is a voluntary Association representing voluntary local Groups managing deer under the voluntary principle so I have no authority to stand up here today and tell you what to do. So all I can do is to inform you that the train of regulation is coming down the tracks and will run us down within a few years if we do not avoid it by doing what needs to be done to make voluntary collaborative deer management work for everybody, to meet the individual objectives of the broad spectrum of those who own and manage the land, but also to contribute to the public interest – environmental, economic and social. That will not be easy, particularly because of the potentially conflicting management objectives in every DMG, but I firmly believe, having seen the great progress made by many Groups over the last few years, that it is achievable, if we all want it. But we will be judged by the speed of our slowest.

The common sense criteria for effective deer management set out in the Benchmark will all become **rules** under a regulated system and furthermore, we will be set cull targets and penalised for not achieving them. **In other words we can either do this willingly or be made to do it.** We would also probably be expected to pay for a regulatory regime. The reintroduction of sporting rates has been suggested by those who have a particular axe to grind.

We have a choice, to keep control of our own land management, albeit constrained already by legislation and 'guidance' from the Scottish Government and its Agencies, or we can cede control to the State and those who seek to influence it. If that happens we will have no one but ourselves to blame.

As to where we go from here:

The Birnam Seminar of April 2013 will be repeated in May this year and will again be targeted at DMG Chairs and Secretaries. As noted above, it will be the final stage in our consultation with you on the DMG Benchmark and it will be a training seminar aimed at developing the ability of Deer Management Groups to meet the Benchmark standard. It will also introduce a data processing package for use by DMGs so that, for example, recorded habitat data can be collated and analysed. We are also currently working with SNH to develop a methodology to assess and demonstrate progress towards The Benchmark at DMG level. You will hear more of this shortly.

SNH has taken on board that the Rural Affairs Committee Review identified areas in which SNH could play a wider role in promoting and supporting collaborative deer management. As a result, as you will hear, they are undertaking a reorganisation of their Wildlife Team to allocate an increased amount of staff time to supporting DMGs. I am appreciative of this. It demonstrates a commitment, which ADMG shares, to make the voluntary approach work to its full potential. In particular Linzi Seivwright, who up until now has worked with ADMG part time, will now be largely full time and she is doing much of the development work on the Initiative that I have just described.

The onus is on ADMG to match the increased resource allocation and I am asking our Committee Regional Representatives, some of whom you elected or re-elected just now, to play a more active role in not only attending local DMG meetings but also supporting Group Chairs in whatever way they may need and working closely with SNH local Wildlife Management Officers. As an example of how this might work in practice, very recently, a DMG Chairman who is a Regional member of the Executive Committee has been asked to act as Interim Chair for a Group in his region to help launch the DMP process and give the Group time to identify a new Chair among its membership following the last incumbent standing down.

You have had more than your usual share of listening to me this morning. There is just one final thing I wish to say.

The Rural Affairs Committee Review was largely triggered by vociferous criticism from some, not all, of the environmental Non-Government Organisations and they gave evidence to the Committee in favour of more regulation. OK, coming as they do from the point of view of concerns about environmental impact, habitat improvement and the number of designated site features that remain in unfavourable condition I can understand and indeed respect their point of view.

However they have had their say and for those in this room who represent them, I would invite them, not for the first time, to now work with us to make the best we can of the voluntary system and to take account of all aspects of the Code by giving more weight to the economic and social benefits of deer management, as the Code directs. As they possibly know, if they stand apart from DMGs, those DMGs will fail to meet the 'inclusiveness' test set by the RACCE Committee that might suit their current standpoint. However I am not a conspiracy theorist so I am sure they would not be so cynical.

I would also like to engage with them in a more objective debate which focuses on sustainable grazing and herbivore carrying capacity rather than just about the presumed impacts of one of the species involved.

We have had regular meetings with the main environmental NGOs and also meet with the LINK Deer Task Force that is represented on the Executive Committee. I would like to think that we are on good working terms and that we can respect each other's differing, sometimes conflicting, points of view.

This equally needs to be the order of the day at Deer Management Group level. There are cases where environmental NGOs may be at daggers drawn with neighbouring deer forests; others where the issue is forestry and equally differences can occur between private landholdings with different management objectives. In those uncompromising conflict scenarios, everybody loses. That is where the ADMG Principles of Collaboration come in. It has been well circulated and is downloadable from the website.

Those who represent different and potentially conflicting land management objectives whether they be managing for stalking, for environmental regeneration, for timber production, for farming or for tourism, need to work together because all those land uses are equally legitimate and need to be fairly represented within a Deer Management Group. We all aspire to a flourishing environment with deer in it, albeit we may differ over the numbers. We need to stand together on the common ground rather than exaggerate our differences. That means give and take, compromise and respect between neighbours, even, dare I say it, to use the "F" word, where fencing is the issue.

I have asked the NGOs to endorse the ADMG Principles of Collaboration that, incidentally, were commended during the Parliamentary hearings. I have also asked them individually to agree to support deer management under the voluntary system for as long as that remains the ground rule. I am pleased to have had their agreement on both scores. We should now expect to see that in practice.

The NGOs must be active and equal players within Deer Management Groups and their management objectives must be provided for in deer management planning. It is a pleasing sign that we are moving in the right direction that two DMGs are now chaired by NGO representatives and another has an NGO Secretary. Also that one of the largest land owning NGOs elected not to participate in giving evidence to the RACCE Committee in favour of more regulation.

Now I have finished and if all that sounded too much like a sermon from the pulpit I am sorry. I do know that in speaking to you in this room, I am preaching to the converted. So your job for next year is to get your neighbours to come to the AGM with you and to play their part in making their DMGs effective. **To conclude, we are at a very important moment and it is necessary to speak plainly. There is much to do at all levels so I look for your support over the coming year.**

Questions or comments please.

Richard Cooke
20 February 2014