

## No easing up as we await outcome of the SNH Review



Richard Cooke, Chairman  
Association of Deer Management Groups

**Our main preoccupation over recent months has of course been the Parliamentary review of deer management by the**

**Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee (ECCLR) following publication by SNH of the report 'Deer Management in Scotland'.**

**The Committee has received a large body of written submissions and in the five verbal sessions has taken considerable trouble to hear all points of view and to understand how deer management in Scotland works in practice and the extent of the "step change" which has occurred in the DMGs since the predecessor RACCE Committee carried out the last review in 2013.**

ADMG submitted written and gave verbal evidence to the Committee and this can be found here [www.deer-management.co.uk/general-info/parliament-and-political/](http://www.deer-management.co.uk/general-info/parliament-and-political/). ADMG has been critical of some aspects of the SNH Report as can be seen from our written submission available on our website.

We now await the Committee's findings and any subsequent actions by the Scottish Government. However, some clear messages have emerged:

- Deer management differs widely across Scotland. One size does not fit all and lowland and urban deer management require a very different approach to the established DMG system in the open red deer range.
- SNH will be encouraged by Government to use its statutory powers, such as Section 8, where deer management is not functioning properly under the voluntary principle.
- DMGs will now be expected to demonstrate that their new deer management plans are effective and can be delivered.
- Habitat impact assessments will be a priority for DMGs.
- Lowland deer management will receive more attention and Local Authorities will be required to engage with deer management as required by the WANE Act 2011.
- The 'public interest' will be the yardstick against which deer management continues to be judged.

Most (not quite all) DMGs have made remarkable progress over the last two years and I am confident that that will now continue strongly into the delivery of deer management plans. Only a small number of Groups as yet have comprehensive habitat monitoring in place so this will be the first priority for 2017.

The ADMG immediate work programme will include working with SNH and other interests in reviving Best Practice and in completing the development of the deer management data handling programme SWARD. Our Project Fund, established last summer, will enable us to take a leading role in this but I should mention that while we are most grateful to those who have contributed, we are still some way short of our target of £65,000 and we will therefore welcome further donations.

As ever ADMG will support Member DMGs through the ongoing and rapid process of change.



*Corran, a 7 year old Highland pony that works the Callater beat, Invercauld Estate, won the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy at the 2016 GWCT Scottish Game Fair with stalker Andrew (Will) Reid. For more information about the 2017 event visit [www.scottishfair.com](http://www.scottishfair.com)*

## Why the obsession with deer numbers when it's impacts that count?



Dr Linzi Seivwright  
Caorann Ecological Consulting

**How many deer does Scotland have and is this too many? This was the crux of the discussion which seemed to grip the recent evidence sessions on Deer Management undertaken by the Scottish Government's Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (ECCLR) Committee. Prompted by the publication of the SNH Review of Deer Management in late 2016, the Committee took evidence from a range of stakeholders with the topic of national deer numbers and deer counts featuring heavily.**

It was reasonably argued that a national count would be unlikely to be practical, particularly given the difficulty of counting deer in woodland. In any case, supposing a national figure could be derived – whether there's three hundred thousand or half a million deer, the numbers alone would be largely irrelevant. The discussion kept emphatically returning to the point that it's the overall impacts of deer (and other herbivores) that matter and how best to manage those impacts is the critical factor.

So are deer counts really necessary? The answer is of course yes, but they should be seen as tools to help us better understand the interaction between densities of deer and localised impacts, and to help inform future management. When considering deer populations it is important to distinguish between a deer count and deer density. Having an overall count simply informs us of the minimum number of individual animals that are estimated to be in that given area at that given time (we accept counts will never be 100% accurate). If the same population is counted in a consistent, frequent way, this allows us to assess changes, or trends in the area over time. Most Deer Management Group boundaries are constructed to manage deer at a scale that is considered to be a largely contained population. For any given area we can then calculate a density figure but unfortunately deer (and other herbivores) are not spread across the landscape uniformly and a general density figure across an area may not necessarily accurately represent or reflect the actual numbers of animals impacting on a habitat or land-holding at any given time. The recent clip of a herd of red deer in Glenshee which went viral on social-media is an excellent example of this.

As a consultant I am frequently asked the question "What is the recommended density of deer?" This simply prompts the question back "What are your land management objectives?"

In trying to manage ecological impacts, we may be able to come up with a rough density of herbivores that we think a specific habitat or land management objective may require, but even with a known population of deer, temporal density changes will occur. For example, an overall population

density might be considered to be sufficiently low for habitat restoration, but if all those animals overwinter in one specific area, the localised density will have increased significantly. Understanding deer movements within a given area is therefore also critical to managing impacts and arguably this is done most effectively at a localised scale.

Through grazing, browsing and trampling deer will naturally have an impact on the environment. Sometimes those impacts are considered to be positive and an important element of natural ecological processes but where deer densities are too high, those impacts may be detrimental. There may be areas where high deer densities are having little negative impact or the converse, relatively low densities of deer that are having a significant negative impact on sensitive habitats. The critical factor for deer managers is to be able to recognise and determine the point at which these impacts become negative – both on environmental/ land management objectives, and on the deer themselves, for example where their welfare or their ability to successfully reproduce is compromised.

The ECCLR Committee commented that a "lack of information" seemed to be at the root of the perceived "deer problem". However, when it comes to the 44 DMGs managing red deer across the upland range, most Groups have already begun gathering the suite of information required to deliver new, up to date plans. Implementing a DMG wide programme of Habitat Monitoring should be a priority for every Group. For Groups carrying out deer counts, they should ensure that they are carried out at least every 3-5 years and as consistently and effectively as possible to remove bias. Many estates will already have good data on indicators such as larder weights and reproductive success that could also be utilised. Developing a better understanding of deer movements within the DMG area will pay dividends and, of course, the presence of other herbivores should also be taken into consideration.

"How long do we need to wait for action?" This was the critical question that kept cropping up from the ECCLR Committee, and for all Groups this should be a prompt. Piecing together this complex land management jigsaw puzzle at a relatively localised scale through the development of a deer management plan, and coming up with a target population density is a complex exercise that DMGs now have to get to grips with, in a relatively short space of time. However, there is no "end point" to deer management and no "magic" number when it comes to deer numbers. It must be recognised that deer management is dynamic, and should be ready and able to adapt to changes in local circumstances. Adaptive management is the way forward and this requires that you use all the best information available, that you monitor the outcome of management actions and that you implement a process of continuous review. It goes without saying that all of this is going to take hard work, commitment, resources and lot of communication. It's time to roll up the sleeves...

# Review of authorisations and night shooting



Randal Wilson  
Vice Chairman, ADMG

**In December 2015 the then Minister for the Environment approved the appointment of a Panel to undertake a review of how SNH issues authorisations to kill deer out of season and at night. The setting up of this Panel came after a number of concerns were expressed to SNH including a growing demand for authorisations and an increase in the number of deer killed under such arrangements.**

The independent Panel comprised six members with Dr Andrew Barbour as Chairman. They reviewed all the available data and also drew heavily on written and oral evidence during the process, meeting five times between February and August 2016. The main conclusions of the Panel were as follows:

- That the processes in place to administer deer authorisations are largely fit for purpose, with a number of recommendations made for SNH to consider on the basis that they may support and improve delivery of the service.
- That the evidence presented during the process clearly demonstrates the importance of, and continued need for, out of season and night shooting deer control to support key public policy objectives and private interests.
- That authorisations cannot and should not be the tool to reconcile different or competing land management interests. They can however influence and support approaches and behaviours to deliver collaborative solutions, and management in line with the Deer Code.
- The Panel considered changes brought in under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011 giving SNH discretion to vary its approach to out of season control according to land type and the nature of damage. The Panel concluded that changes to the current approach were so significant that any consideration went well beyond the authorisation process and should form part of the wider review of deer management.
- No significant changes in the use of either specific or general authorisations was proposed, but moving towards an approach where the control of deer out of season and at night is “an accepted component of deer management planning” was supported. For this change, approaches to deer management planning need to have evolved and be sufficiently robust to handle issues associated with integrating different management objectives. The Panel proposed that SNH should give further consideration to the different approaches to land use and damage type currently in place.

- The Panel considered the openness and transparency of the process and highlighted the importance of the availability of cull information from out of season and night shooting in the context of supporting local collaborative approaches to deer management.
- Wild Deer Best Practice should be reviewed and updated in the light of recent legislative changes, and that further work might be done to more clearly articulate the tests and definitions of “damage” and other “reasonable means”.
- That there were potential benefits in further guidance being developed on deer management planning highlighting that out of season and night shooting are an integral part of modern deer management in many situations and are neither “exceptional or unusual”.

The Panel also identified five key issues that they considered to be important, and made recommendations in four of these five areas, with 14 recommendations in total. The key issues identified by the Panel were:

- The changing nature of deer management in Scotland.
- The need for openness and transparency.
- Resources availability and the need for reasonableness.
- Welfare, training and standards.
- Natural heritage as a land use.

Dr Andrew Barbour, Chair of the Review Panel, said: “Through the review process we were grateful to hear from, and engage with, a number of individuals with an interest, and differing views on the issue. We have concluded that the current process works quite well, but have identified a number of issues for SNH to consider to help to improve delivery of this service.

“We recognise that there are strongly held views on authorisations, but the evidence presented during the review clearly demonstrated the importance of, and the continued need for, out of season and night shooting deer control to support key public policy objectives, as well as to protect private interests. We are supportive of moving towards an approach where the control of deer out of season and at night is regarded as an accepted component of deer management planning.”

Nick Halfhide, SNH’s Director of Operations, said: “We welcome the Deer Panel’s Report and agree with its findings. Out of season and night shooting are important tools in deer management across the country, and we are now working with partners and moving forward with some of the recommendations. I would like to thank the Panel members for all their work as well as the organisations and individuals who have contributed to the review process.”

A full copy of the Panel’s report, conclusions and recommendations can be found here: [www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A2081643.pdf](http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A2081643.pdf)

# Identifying gaps in knowledge and understanding of sustainable deer management in Scotland



Prof Davy McCracken  
Professor of Agricultural Ecology and Head  
of Hill & Mountain Research Centre, SRUC

**The aim of this project was to analyse existing wild deer research and identify specific research and evidence gaps which require to be addressed in order to meet the challenges for each of the five priorities outlined in Scotland's Wild Deer - A National Approach (WDNA). The project was commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Government and conducted by a team from both SRUC and UHI's Centre for Mountain Studies.**

The primary objectives of the project were to: identify and distinguish between gaps in knowledge (i.e. gaps that require further research) and gaps in the way knowledge and information is communicated between stakeholders, therefore representing barriers to achieving the WDNA challenges; and provide recommendations for further research and activities that will address gaps and contribute to meeting the challenges under the five WDNA priorities.

## Cross-cutting issues

A number of themes and issues identified were relevant across all the WDNA priorities:

- Improved communication, information sharing and conflict management are required in order to overcome cross-boundary challenges and mistrust, and facilitate understanding between the different perspectives of the many stakeholders. Building trust will improve the uptake of research and strengthen collaboration.
- Knowledge exchange of existing research and best practice is often more important and more relevant than undertaking new research.
- Improved public engagement and education is needed in order to better inform the public's perception of deer management.
- Upland, lowland, peri-urban and urban areas have their own issues and gaps, but there are also common issues across these areas.
- There is a need to carry out research at a range of spatial and temporal scales.

## Main findings by WDNA Themes

*WDNA 1 - Collaboration and Effective Deer Management Planning and Implementation:* A wider understanding of different stakeholder perspectives and cultures is required to underpin conflict management processes and the future management of deer management groups. Sharing of knowledge and data is necessary for improved deer management planning and this depends on overcoming mistrust between stakeholders. Understanding deer movements and habitat utilisation and how this is influenced by management activities emerged as a key research gap. A lack of available data on local trends and patterns was considered a barrier to improving this evidence base.

*WDNA 2 - Healthy Ecosystems:* Although a considerable amount of research has been carried out on the impacts of deer and other herbivores on habitats and species, there remain knowledge gaps in this area. Most of the key research gaps relate to a need for a better understanding of herbivore impacts and interactions across a range of temporal and spatial scales, and more knowledge on the influence that deer and deer management have on ecosystem services. One of the main knowledge transfer gaps relates to the need to facilitate understanding of the herbivore impact assessment methodology and the practical use of HIA data within the deer management planning process, through the provision of skills training.

*WDNA 3 - Lowland and Urban Deer:* Research gaps that did emerge as important for the lowland and urban deer context tended to reflect those that are also pertinent in the uplands. There is a need to understand the effectiveness of existing collaborative structures and linked to this are more context specific knowledge transfer challenges related to incentivising and involving stakeholders in lowland and urban areas e.g. local authorities and the public, and ensuring that decision making incorporates multiple perspectives. A further research gap concerns the relationship between deer population dynamics and habitat impacts in lowland and urban areas. There are related knowledge transfer needs for improved gathering and sharing of information about local deer populations.



Crianlarich workshop

**WDNA 4 - Economic and Community Development:** In this particular challenge, nearly all the gaps identified were research gaps rather than knowledge transfer or exchange gaps, contrary to the other challenges. The key research gaps related to a need for more studies on socio-economic impacts at local and site level, the venison supply chain and the potential for diversification, as well as cost-benefit analysis on alternative deer management models, both for upland and lowland wild deer. Unlike the other challenges, the gap analysis also identified a particular policy gap, to gain improved clarity as to what the vision for wild deer management should be at the national level. Clearly the WDNA was designed to fulfil this role, which suggests stakeholders either feel it is not providing the vision or they are not fully engaged with the process.

**WDNA 5 - Training and Wild Deer Welfare:** In this theme gaps predominantly related to knowledge transfer gaps and/or gaps in uptake of training and/or practice - communicating knowledge and facilitating knowledge uptake as opposed to carrying out new research. The enhancement of data driven management processes is a strong cross-cutting theme within WDNA 5, particularly in relation to improved accuracy and

coverage in cull records as a basis for welfare assessments and wider sustainable deer management processes. A second critical cross-cutting theme which has emerged as a key priority knowledge transfer opportunity is the further professionalisation of deer management through enhanced training provision and uptake in key areas; participatory approaches, Information Technology and Habitat Impact Assessment. Increasing the uptake and direct relevance of habitat assessment and management to all deer managers represents a cornerstone of WDNA 5.

As part of the project a web-based deer research resource has been created that provides an online database of deer research relevant to the five WDNA priorities ([www.deerscotland.info](http://www.deerscotland.info)). The full report will be published shortly.

*Holland, J., McMorran, R., Morgan-Davies, C., Bryce, R., Glass, J., Pollock, M., McCracken, D., Glass, R., Woolvin, A. & Thomson, S. 2017 Meeting the challenge of wild deer research to support delivery of sustainable deer management in Scotland. Report prepared for Scottish Government, SNH and FCS by SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre and UHI's Centre for Mountain Studies under Project SCL/025/15*

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## Feral pigs - an update

Morag Milne  
Wildlife Policy Officer, SNH

**Over the last 15 years, free-ranging, breeding populations of feral pigs have become established in Scotland. Following escapes or deliberate releases from wild boar and domestic pig farms, or from collections, at least three breeding populations have become established; in Dumfriesshire, in central Perthshire and in Lochaber. One-off sightings have come from as far apart as Cawdor, Foyers, Glen Lyon and Tomintoul.**

As they emerge from the woods to leave their traces in farmer's and crofter's fields, and in golf courses, gardens and recreational areas, feral pigs are beginning to attract more public attention.

All of the feral pigs in Scotland are the result of illegal releases and escapes from captivity. 'Wild boar' *Sus scrofa scrofa* became extinct in the UK about 700 years ago. Although formerly native, wild boar are now considered to be outwith their native range in Scotland. This means that it is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (section 14) to release any type of pig, including wild boar.

Because wild boar can interbreed with domestic pigs, the genetics of the feral populations established in Scotland may come from a mix of both wild boar and domestic pigs. We therefore refer to these animals as 'feral pigs'.

Recent surveys indicate the feral pig density is still low in Scotland and that we could control their populations if land managers act promptly. But if these populations are allowed to grow unchecked, their rooting behaviour could become a major threat to agricultural productivity, and their presence could undermine efforts to control an outbreak of animal disease. At low densities feral pigs can benefit the natural heritage helping to speed nutrient cycling and break up dense turf to encourage woodland regeneration but at higher densities they can damage vulnerable species (including some nesting birds, invertebrates and plants).



*Image of pigs from the camera trap survey Feral pigs at night, Dumfries and Galloway 2016. Photo: SNH/FES*

Feral pigs pose only a limited threat to human health and safety; although they will attack dogs the injuries people have experienced (in other countries with wild boar/feral pig populations) are mostly the result of road traffic accidents.

The existing feral pig populations are still at low density in Scotland and we therefore have a choice about whether the animals should stay or go. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is providing the Scottish Government with policy advice.

In the meantime, SNH is looking for the help of stalkers, gamekeepers, landowners, farmers and foresters to better understand the distribution of these animals, and the speed at which they are moving into new territory. There is a simple way to report sightings of feral pigs, and that is to complete a short sighting form on the irecord website - [www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/enter-casual-record](http://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/enter-casual-record): Your records will be fed into the National Biodiversity Network and you can see the current sightings at: <http://bit.ly/2kS5D4X>

Alternatively, you can phone **SEARS** on **08452 302 050** (24hrs/7days).

You can control feral pigs in Scotland, and it should be undertaken humanely and safely. Interim guidance about methods for controlling feral pigs is available and you can contact SNH direct at [enquiries@snh.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@snh.gov.uk) or call **01463 725 000**. The ADMG group return contains a section asking for information on wild boar or feral pigs.

Any wild pigs that have been shot should be tested for *Trichinella* in accordance with Food Standard Scotland's guidance if you are supplying the carcasses or their meat for human consumption.

# Norway - deer management, grazing and regenerating woodlands



Richard Cooke, Chairman - Association of Deer Management Groups

**I guess the underlying premise for this trip was "Why can't Scotland be more like Norway?" and indeed that comparison has been aired during the current Parliamentary review of deer management. Certainly my interest was to understand that comparison better and, as my fellow travellers might perhaps confirm, my initial mindset was somewhat defensive - why can we not just be content to value rural Scotland for its individuality and why should it be a negative that we have less woodland, more deer, and larger landholdings than some other countries?**

**A diversity of landscapes has much to be said for it. And anyway, forest cover in Scotland has also increased by a factor of three over the last century, albeit most of it planted. Vive la difference!**

However, having seen the astonishing woodland regeneration and abundant underlying flora that characterises the parts of southern Norway which we visited, from sea level to 1000 metres, it would be perverse not to want some more of that for Scotland. The similarities between coastal south-west Norway and northern Scotland, and between Setesdal and the Cairngorms, are many - climatological, geological, landscape - and to a lesser extent cultural, and the argument that similar change is possible in parts of Scotland is persuasive.

We saw before-and-after photographs showing the areas we visited as being bare of vegetation up to the mid twentieth century, as much of the Highlands are now. The remarkable change, coincidental rather than planned, was due to agricultural abandonment of large areas as small-scale farming became unviable from the mid nineteenth century. With limited numbers of wild herbivores present at that time the land was in effect rested and left to itself for a century or more. As a result, tree

regeneration and all the accompanying botanical changes were able to happen over that long timescale without significant grazing pressure and without protection. The result is extensive and diverse woodlands which are now beyond damage from grazing, browsing and trampling and which can now accommodate some domestic livestock in summer and a still relatively small number of wild ungulates, moose, red deer and roe deer, as well as reindeer above the tree line; also mammalian predators such as lynx and pine marten which can be managed by hunting, (as indeed can beavers, of which we saw much evidence).

As to the cultural effect, it is clear that Norwegian society as a whole retains a closer connection with the land than is now the case in Scotland and has a proportionately larger rural population. Of interest is that all children of school age are required to spend school time, about a week annually, in the outdoors. Hunting is an intrinsic part of Norwegian culture and wildlife is valued and managed accordingly. In addition many Norwegians own or use the cabins which we saw throughout the countryside. Indeed one of the most controversial topics appears to be conflict between cabin developers and those determined to protect reindeer migration routes.

So, in view of what we saw, what can we learn from the Norwegian experience? First of all, it is not an "either/or". We can value our differences as well as learning from our neighbours.

Secondly, the direction of travel in Scotland is already in the Norwegian direction. An increasing number of landholdings, private, public, community and NGO, are managed primarily for habitat change, although not necessarily to the exclusion of hunting. Indeed most of the estates with which I am familiar already have a significant and increasing component of land, surrounding but not impinging on their commercial operations, which is allowed to "grow wild". The deer management planning process developed over the last two years also encourages neighbouring landholdings to think collectively about habitat improvement.





*Should Scotland's landscape be more like that of south Norway?*

Thirdly, grazing or lack of it is a key catalyst in habitat change. Sheep numbers are in decline across much of the Highlands although the opposite is the case where sheep are being used, mainly summer only, to control ticks, which pose an increasing risk to both human and animal health. Open range red deer numbers are also declining steadily as a result of increased culling.

We now need to think more about overall grazing impacts rather than focusing on deer, sheep, feral goats, rabbits, or hares, in isolation, as we are wont to do. Deer management plans in their emerging new format can provide this overview. In some cases fencing will continue to be necessary to allow potentially conflicting land uses to coexist in the shorter term.

We also need to be cautious in assuming that no grazing would automatically lead to a Norwegian habitat response across Scotland. Although there are many similarities, there may also be differences, for example, lack of ready seed sources or more extensive unsuitable seedbeds. Some regeneration schemes in Scotland have failed, even where fencing has been used. And it should be noted again that in Norway it all took several generations and presumably a substantial reduction in the working resident human population. That would be a very high price to pay.

And finally, country sports enthusiasts come to Scotland from all over the world and value our open landscapes, blooming moorland in late summer, and mountains, with deer in numbers, in autumn and winter. This is a valuable and unique hunting tourism niche that Scotland offers. Deer stalking in its present

form, with populations managed to provide it in a sustainable way, can continue, without precluding the expansion of regenerating woodland and the distinctive hunting more characteristic of Norway and other European countries.

So my conclusion is that, by a process of evolution rather than revolution, land managers in Scotland, whatever their primary objectives, can individually and collectively identify areas where they can "make more room for Nature". We can think of land that is not in specific economic land use not necessarily as being waste land; although the increasing areas infested by bracken or rhododendron perhaps qualify for that perception. In doing so it should be possible to maintain economic activity that supports employment in rural communities and contributes to the Scottish Government Land Use Strategy and therefore merits financial support on public interest grounds. A growing proportion of land can be left to "rewild" sometimes without significant capital expense. However there should not be an assumption that, for example, areas of heather moorland which might be colonised by trees should cease to be managed for grouse with the economic and biodiversity benefits which that contributes. For such radical changes the opportunity cost would need to be carefully assessed.

In effect, land uses can be more carefully zoned and fine tuned to maintain existing economic activity while encouraging a progressive process of environmental change, without necessitating the stock and human clearances that would be required to create a grazing "holiday" such as has allowed the wholesale regeneration of woodland to occur in much of Norway.

# Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV)

## Standards revised and updated for producers and processors

Jonathan Whitehead  
SQWV

**We all like to eat good food and take for granted that the quality is of highest standard - none more so than the consumers of wild venison produced by members of the Scottish Quality Wild Venison assurance scheme.**

Scottish deer forests and estates continue to demonstrate the commitment to produce safe, high quality food by the increasing membership of SQWV, and demonstrating their commitment to Best Practice. However while the demand for venison grows, so does the pressure to maintain the high standards that have been established.

Unlike farmed meats, the process by which wild venison reaches the consumer is significantly different and is exposed to a range of different challenges in the production of high quality and safe food. Farmed animals are slaughtered and processed in a controlled environment where risks to food safety can be continually managed. However, the initial part of the process for wild venison to reach the food chain commences with the cull, gralloch and transport of the carcass to the larder. Only once the carcass is in the larder is there any similarity to the processes undergone by farmed stock.

Over the years SQWV has always required scheme members and their staff to demonstrate Best Practice when handling carcasses, reminding them that it is more than a deer carcass, or a by-product of a sporting or management enterprise. It is a foodstuff and must be handled accordingly.

Since the incidence of *E Coli O157* in 2015 a considerable amount of work has been carried out to review the practices and processes by which venison reaches the food chain. The purpose of this work was to identify any weak links in the chain that could cause a repetition of the 2015 issues and in addition cause significant reputational risk to perceptions of wild venison with our customers.

The review has led to a number of proposed changes in the SQWV standards that are yet to be agreed by the SQWV board. That board consists of representatives from all sectors of the venison industry from producer to processor with their views certainly representative of the many rather than the few.

The message that the proposed changes to the standards aims to deliver is that every effort must be made to ensure food safety is not compromised.

For many years the Trained Hunter Declaration (THD) has been used by stalker and game dealer as the initial declaration that the venison is safe to eat, and free from any abnormalities. Until now there have not been specific scheme requirements as to who can sign the declaration, but the standards may now require that those signing the THD have DSC 1 (or equivalent)

and also have DSC 2 or be able to demonstrate they are working towards achieving this qualification.

Linked with this demonstration of knowledge and competence is the recommendation that all stalkers should maintain ongoing training to ensure that they are able to demonstrate current knowledge and understanding of best practice and food safety. This can be achieved through Best Practice due to be reinstated during 2017, or through a readily accessible food safety course that can be completed on line via a range of suppliers at little cost. Continuous professional development is a requirement of many aspects of our lives, and there should be no compelling reason why this is not adopted by the wild game sector, demonstrating our ongoing commitment to best practice and quality.



Larder work. Photo: James Hall



The review focused particularly on carcase handling from the point of the cull to uplift from the larder by the game dealer. The changes may increase the requirement of the competence of those completing or overseeing the cull and subsequent gralloch, so that a qualified person is always present. This is the person that will be signing the THD, so it is a logical step.

Two online films will soon be available that will aim to demonstrate the current best practice in gralloching techniques and management of the carcase in the larder. Understanding that the highest risk of *E Coli O157* comes from the 20cms of back passage from the rectum focuses the mind on how that part of the gralloch should be managed to minimise risk.

No matter how competent a stalker, all will at some time have some contamination from either internal spillage or contamination from, for example, a lengthy drag back to the vehicle or pony. For many, current practice would be to wash the carcase cavity to remove the contamination. However, the proposed revised standards prohibit this. Scientific advice is that this only removes the obvious contamination, but spreads the non-visible contamination around the carcase.

In cases where it is very minor then the proposal is that trimming in the larder may be the best option. In more severe cases, the worst of the solid content could be removed using food grade paper towels, and the rest left to allow veterinary inspection of the carcase and advice of a suitable course of action. Discussion with the game dealer would be advisable prior to submitting such a carcase.

The new SQWV Processing standards also intend to reinforce the requirements for a fully traceable collection process, and one that maintains the hygiene and cold chain requirements already set in place by the producers.

The message from SQWV is that any changes to the standards, for both producer (and processor) should not be difficult to achieve. They will allow all involved in the scheme to demonstrate current knowledge and understanding of food quality and safety together with Best Practice, and will reinforce the message to the consumer that wild venison is of a high quality and safe to eat.

*For more information about the SQWV scheme see:*  
[www.sqwv.co.uk](http://www.sqwv.co.uk)

## Clarification on recent changes to firearms applications and renewals



Colin Shedden  
Director, BASC Scotland

**Firearms legislation can be confusing and there have been some recent procedural changes that affect those applying for or renewing certificates.**

One change that you will experience at renewal is the requirement to take a letter, that Police Scotland supply, along to your GP. This will ask your GP to address three questions. Does he or she know of any reason why you should not have access to firearms, have you (over the past five years) suffered from any of a specific list of illnesses (such as mental health issues or neurological conditions like Parkinson's) and have they placed an electronic marker on your medical record? Sounds pretty straightforward - and for the vast majority of us it will be. However, when this agreement was first reached last April - with the Home Office, the Police, the BMA and shooting organisations - it was "anticipated" that there would be no charge for GPs to undertake this work.

What we have is a situation where Police Scotland - quite reasonably in the eyes of most shooters - now seek medical information before granting or renewing certificates. We know that since this approach was adopted in April they have found some individuals who had misled the

police about their health, mental or otherwise. We also know now that most GP practices legally can, and do, charge for this service - from no charge up to a mind-boggling £200. It may be a bit of postcode lottery but the good news is that this should be a one-off charge - in my opinion once your medical records are tagged there should be no need for any further charges at your next renewal. However, this common-sense approach has still to be confirmed.

There was a bit of a crisis last autumn when about 10% of the 960 or so GP practices in Scotland chose not to participate. This was a headache for all concerned. Fortunately, sensible advice from the police and from the BMA now means that this is now down to 6 practices, and most of these are prepared to make alternative arrangements for their patients.

BASC has just undertaken a survey to assess the actual costs that GPs in Scotland are charging and the results will be available soon. In the meantime, if you experience any difficulties with your own renewal then please get in touch with BASC Scotland for advice.

Some other changes have yet to be implemented, such as the removal of the prohibitive Section 5 status of expanding ammunition; we are obliged to use expanding ammunition to shoot deer and the removal of this restriction is welcome. It could reduce the cost of our ammunition and will simplify the situation for home-loaders.

# Scottish Venison News



Dick Playfair  
Secretary, Scottish Venison Partnership

## Market report

Last year in the run up to Scottish Venison Day, 4 September, and having assessed all the relevant data on venison sales, we concluded that if market trends continue then the UK will be importing more than double the amount of venison than it does now in 5 years time.

That forecast is based on very modest UK market growth of around 10 per cent per annum and a smaller increase in domestic quantity produced of 5 per cent year on year.

SVP estimated that on that basis UK consumption of venison would increase from a current c 3800 tonnes to more than 6000 tonnes by 2021, but imports would also need to double to meet that market demand. SVP considers that total UK production capacity will be around 4800 tonnes by 2021, although one third of this, from late season stags and roe, will continue to be exported. This would mean importing around 3000 tonnes.

New Zealand exports into Europe are reported to be dropping as NZ farmers go through a period of retaining hinds in order to build herd numbers allowing more venison to be available for export in 18 months to two years time. In addition, however, New Zealand producers are also moving greater volumes into the USA and seven of their largest producers are also now licensed to export into China. Europe may find that New Zealand may not be able to provide the answer, and Germany, Europe's largest importer of venison from the southern hemisphere has reported already starting to feel the effects of that reduced flow. In view of this situation, where might the shortfall be sourced from, and could this mean a slowing down or contraction of the market?

In terms of how this might affect the wild venison producer it should mean that the UK market, at least for the time being, is secure, and opportunities for UK farmed venison will continue to grow. It is therefore unfortunate that in this buoyant climate, and one where the £/euro exchange rate has been an additional incentive for export, that there is further upheaval in the game dealer/processor sector. However, Simpson Game also now has SQWV assured status joining Ardgay Game and Highland Game with that important accreditation.

## PGI

Not only does SVP monitor and report on what is happening in the market but is also at the forefront of promoting venison from Scotland, both wild and farmed, and the push continues to encourage more farms and estates to expand into the deer sector, particularly given the current market conditions described.

SVP is also pursuing the application for PGI (Protected Geographical Indicator) status for Scottish Wild Venison for all deer species, upland and lowland. This initiative is principally concerned with provenance and process, and SVP is working with SAC Consulting to bring an application forward. A first meeting took place in January with the Great British Food Unit at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Scottish Government will also be engaged in the process. DEFRA has just passed comment on the draft application which will now be revised in line with their advice and suggestions. It is hoped that an announcement of the public consultation that forms part of the PGI process may be able to be made at the Scottish Game Fair.

How will PGI affect producers? In short if your venison is being produced in a manner and to a standard that conforms to the necessary checks, standards and traceability then it can be labeled as 'Scottish Wild Venison' as a clear distinction to imported or farmed venison. The scheme is not about gaining marketing advantage but about telling the story and, given Scotland's proud stalking tradition, there is a great story to tell.

## Food safety

Following the *E Coli O157* outbreak of Autumn 2015, SVP has been working with Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) to produce recommendations for tightening of procedures for SQWV assured producers to ensure that risk of contamination is reduced in the journey of venison from hill to plate.

This has resulted in a number of changes to the SQWV standard, and it is hoped those who do not have accreditation will also take heed. Such systems provide a safeguard, both in terms of ensuring that all risks have been identified, and then appropriate steps taken to minimise them during the process. As everyone who attended last year's AGM heard from Ian McWatt, Director of Operations at Food Standards Scotland, wild venison is in the spotlight and it is up to those in it to make changes and be extra vigilant in ensuring that what goes into the food chain for human consumption is safe to be there.

To support this drive, SVP and SQWV have jointly commissioned two short films which will be available for everyone to see highlighting Best Practice when undertaking the gralloch on the hill, and for larder work. These films will also incorporate the changes to the SQWV standards. These films will be in circulation ahead of the stag season this year and have been part-funded by SNH.

Incidentally, Food Standards Scotland now has a food crime help line where suspected offences or malpractice in the food chain can be reported free and anonymously. The Food Crime number is **0800 028 7926**.

## Communication

Communications continue to be important. Last year a burst of activity was implemented around Scottish venison day to ratchet up the visibility of venison in the media resulting in extensive coverage across the Scottish press and on the BBC news, the Times, Telegraph, and food and sporting specialist publications.

All opportunities to tell the venison story are vital and should be capitalised on. Venison, which for a long time was seen as a by-product of deer management and stalking, is increasingly perceived as deliberate and important output from it, and we work very closely with SQWV in pressing this message home. Such initiatives as the Mallaig Food Festival (see Alistair Gibson's article on p.12) demonstrate how estates, deer forests and DMGs can get involved.

A venison recipe competition again ran online for Scottish Venison Day, the winner being Alasdair MacLeod from the Isle of Lewis with his recipe for Loin of Venison with Harris Gin Sauce. He wins a luxury break for two at Easthaugh House, Perthshire. Mac & Wild also laid on a special Venison Day brunch at their Fitzrovia, London restaurant to mark the occasion.

SVP operates across the board, upland and lowland, wild and farmed, private and public sector and is principally funded by the 2p/kilo levy collected through the SQWV assured game dealers and a grant from Forestry Commission Scotland. Its budget remains small but it is the only body that represents the entire venison sector, and its product. Without the support of those producers who put their venison through SQWV assured processors, and from which all others benefit, the work of SVP would not be possible. And in these times where major opportunities exist for Scottish venison, both in the UK market and further afield, it has a vital role to play.

# New deer larder for Caithness

**Tim Cockerill**  
Forest District Manager, Forest Enterprise Scotland,  
North Highland Forest District

Work is nearing completion on an exciting project whereby Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) are installing a new deer larder on the campus of the UHI Game Keeping College at Dale Farm, near Halkirk in Caithness

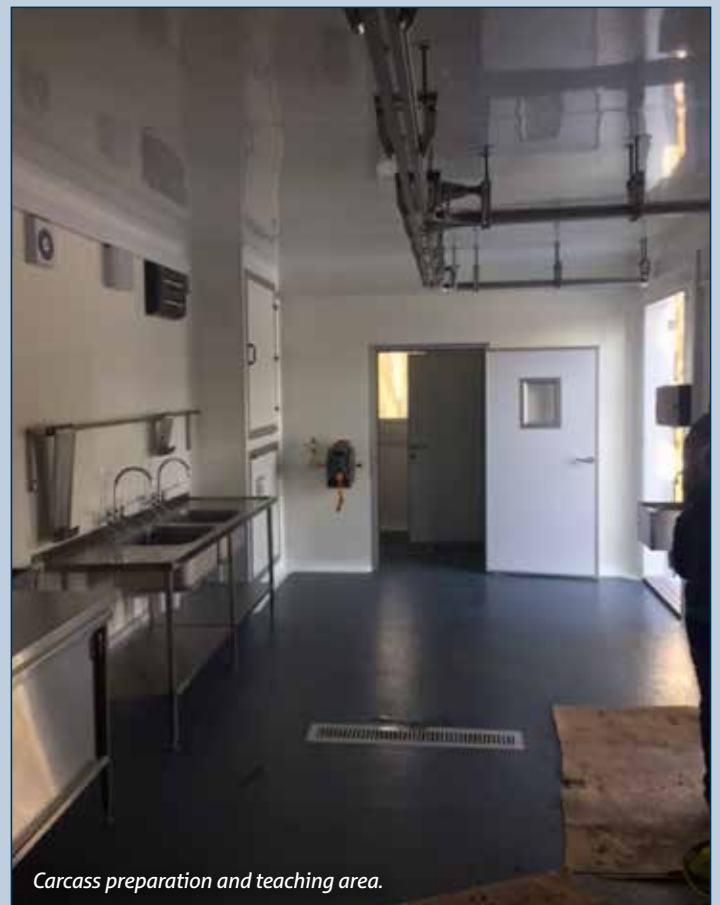
Following a fire at the FES depot at Lybster in 2014, North Highland Forest District found itself without a deer larder in Caithness. Initial thoughts were simply to replace the larder on the same site. However, after a period of deliberation it was agreed to look for a more central location that better matched the distribution of FES forests in Caithness, particularly its new woodland sites at Sibster and Dale.

Chance discussions with the College revealed that there was interest from UHI in developing a joint facility that could be used both as a commercial deer larder, by FES, and as an educational resource. Further discussions with the landowner at Dale Farm revealed that he was supportive and the project was eventually given the go ahead in early 2016. Planning consent was agreed later that year with site preparation and service installations taking place over the autumn and winter.

The new state of the art larder units, supplied by SMH, were finally delivered to site on 15 January after a gruelling three day journey from England in which they had to contend with snow and high winds. At the time of writing we are still waiting for the electricity and IT links to be connected but hopefully that will be done by mid-March by which time the larder should be operational.

The larder is designed to hold 50 red deer carcasses in two chiller units. This design will allow for secondary processing and the storage of game birds, if desired, due to the fact that the chillers are physically separated.

Whilst FES will make full use of this facility it's arguable that UHI Gamekeeping students will be the biggest long-term beneficiaries. With the students now having access to a high quality, on campus, training facility, the College should be able to deliver greater consistency in the training of carcass handling and preparation. At some point it's also envisaged that veterinary work and butchery/carcass preparation training could be carried out in the new facility. All this adds another dimension and more versatility to the unit.



*Carcass preparation and teaching area.*

## Good for deer sector to get engaged locally



Alistair Gibson  
Glenfinnan Estate and Chair of West  
Lochaber DMG

**Last year the first ever 'Taste the Wild' Food Festival ran in Mallaig on 10 September. It was a roaring success with around 1,200 locals and visitors trying out the many artisan foods on display, enjoying the demonstrations and events, and learning a bit about local food production. And the range of local produce was exceptional – from natural fruit drinks to chocolate, and from beef and cheese to venison. It was a showcase of local food from the West Highlands and quite staggering how diverse what was available to see, taste and buy could be.**

Given that this was all about food then the demonstrations from chefs were bound to be a major attraction. Jak O'Donnell from The Sisters Restaurant was an Ambassador for the event and langoustines were one of her featured dishes – the demonstrations took place in the fish market with the harbour as the back drop.

I was asked by Duncan Gibson, no relation, chef at the Glenfinnan House Hotel, if I could attend and give a talk about stalking and venison. We supply all the venison to the hotel which is situated in a superb location on the shores of Loch Sheil close to the Bonnie Prince Charlie 45 monument, and not too far from the Harry Potter viaduct!

The hotel is an important outlet for the estate. We provide around 14 hinds to the hotel as I have the necessary Venison Dealers License and Duncan has the butchery skills and know how. Duncan also gave butchery demonstrations at the Festival.

So, although it is not usually something I relish, I gave a talk about deer stalking and deer management which I hope was well received. Shirley Spear OBE, head of the new Scottish Government Food Commission and of course the renowned 3 Chimneys on the Isle of Skye, chaired the Big Fish debate which focused on the problems faced by those in the fishing sector, and there was discussion among other things about ways in which fishing and tourism could work more closely together.

The event also hosted the inaugural World Prawn Peeling Championships with more than 70 entrants. This was won by Lainey Bowman from The Steam Inn who peeled 10 prawns in just over 23 seconds! In the evening there was a dinner at the Mallaig and Morar Community Centre where more than 100 people were served a four-course gourmet meal, and a ceilidh followed.

The event was organised by the Road to the Isles Marketing Group in partnership with West Highland College UHI and Scotland Food and Drink. Five local hotels played a major part – Arisaig Hotel, Arisaig House, the West Highland Hotel, Glenfinnan House Hotel and the Steam Inn and funding came from the Road to the Isles Marketing Group, Highland Council, Sir Cameron Macintosh, and a grant from the Community Food Fund.

It was truly a community event, staged for the benefit of the whole area, forging links between local business, food producers and the tourism sector. We were pleased to be involved and, should the opportunity present itself again, I am sure we would be back.

## Sporting Rates reintroduction

There is little that can be said at this stage about the reintroduction of sporting rates. All properties should have received and returned the Assessors' questionnaire and the Assessors, being heavily immersed in the overall revaluation of business rates, have yet to turn their full attention to analysis of the great volume of information received on sportings, thought to be in respect of up to 50,000 land holdings. It is therefore likely to be some time before the first assessments emerge. We have yet to learn whether any allowance may be made for membership of a DMG although this should certainly have been recorded on the questionnaires and raised in negotiations.

We do know that the Small Business Bonus Scheme will apply (100 per cent relief for RVs up to £15,000, 25 per cent to £18,000) but other business rateable enterprises (eg self catering or renewables) will be added to sporting rights assessments in respect of these reliefs. There is a right of appeal for 6 months after an assessment is issued and ADMG's advice at this stage is that all assessments should be appealed, at least until a clearer picture emerges.



*Unusual view to the harbour with a deer carcass in the foreground!*

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