

RICHARD COOKE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE ADMG AGM

22 March, 2018

Welcome one and all

In making my report for the year I must first refer to the very sad loss of Stephen Gibbs who died in November. He had been poorly for some time although he made light of his health problems and continued to take an interest in deer matters and indeed to Chair the Scottish Venison Partnership until his retirement at the end of 2016. SVP held an excellent lunch for him in Edinburgh to mark the occasion. He was in very good form.

Finlay and I attended Stephen's funeral on Arran on 27 November 27 and typically modest, he had insisted that there should be no eulogy. Perhaps some of those present were disappointed not to hear something of what was a very full life including many contributions to the interests of others, not least ADMG.

Stephen was the second ADMG Chairman, succeeding Captain Alwyn Farquharson in 1994 when the organisation was just two years old. He continued in that role until 2005, and, as the Association's Secretary over those years I had the privilege and pleasure of working with him throughout.

As I have said in my obituary for him both in Scope, printed today, and previously in Land Business, he was a very hands-on Chairman and under his direction ADMG made much progress as the representative and coordinating organisation for the deer sector in Scotland. We all owe Stephen a very great deal and I am pleased to be able to acknowledge his unequalled contribution today.

We also very sadly lost Sarah Holman in June. Sarah died suddenly and certainly prematurely as a very active 66 year old, as a result of septicaemia. Sarah was a founder member of ADMG and our Committee link with many deer forest owners in the south. Always interested and supportive she was a great source of sound advice when asked. The Ardnamurchan community was very close to her heart and she was very much loved as was evident at her funeral at Acharacle.

Turning now to the ongoing business of ADMG, theoretically we might be enjoying a breathing space between the 2016 and 2019 Reviews. However, as ever, 2017 has been hectic and deer management continues to place increasing demands on all of us in every DMG.

During the year the ECCLR Committee published its findings and recommendations following the 2016 Review. You will have seen these at the time and I will not go into detail other than to say that their conclusion was that more regulation and intervention was required. However, the Cabinet Secretary in her response to the Committee's Report last summer elected not to take any further legislative measures at this time. She did however set up the Deer Working Group to review the system of deer management in Scotland, both Highland and Lowland, and to make proposals for improvements by Spring 2019. She also announced the formation of a Lowland Deer Panel to consider the distinct aspects of deer management across lowland Scotland where the mix of deer species is different, the pattern of land use is more complex and where deer are to be found in close proximity to people, particularly in and around the towns and cities of Central Scotland.

Membership of the Deer Working Group, Simon Pepper (Chairman), Dr Andrew Barbour, Dr Jayne Glass and Robin Callander as special adviser, was announced in October and it has commenced work. I have been appointed as an external advisor and will in fact be attending a meeting of the Group next Monday. It is still early days and I suspect that the Working Group is really only at the stage of reviewing available information so it is difficult to envisage yet what might come out of its deliberations. However there doubtless will be some recommendations for change and its conclusions will emerge at about the same time as SNH is working on its 2019 Review Report so we can expect Spring 2019 to be an interesting time. Hopefully we will have a clearer idea as to where it is all going by next year's AGM.

With regard to the Lowland Deer Panel, not so central to the interests of this meeting but important to the sector as a whole, its membership has been announced only recently and it is required to report to the Scottish Government in September this year, a surprisingly short timeframe.

Learning the lessons of the 2016 Review ADMG is determined that the deer sector must have clarity from SNH as to how it is to be judged a year from now. That being so we submitted a paper to SNH in December, under the title "Deer Management Review 2019 - Understanding Scottish Government expectations", this looks for detailed answers on a number of points. In response, SNH has produced a draft list of priority topics, based on the assessment process, indicating where progress must be demonstrated by each DMG if it is to score well in the 2019 re-assessment, and if the sector as a whole is to be judged as having made sufficient progress between 2016 and 2019. ADMG has subsequently met several times with SNH to consider this in detail and constructive discussions are ongoing. Linzi and Donald Fraser will be talking about this in more detail later this morning. The intention is that we will all know exactly what is expected and have sufficient time to address the key areas. No surprises!

Those DMGs who use the services of consultants to develop their deer management plans and introduce habitat impact assessments should be well placed to meet the standards required, possibly with ongoing assistance from their advisor. I must say however that those Groups which have taken a DIY approach to deer management planning and habitat impact assessments may in some cases find that their available time and resources are not enough for them to raise their game sufficiently and I would ask them to see this as an urgent challenge and to consider seeking professional help. Please feel free to approach ADMG for advice.

In order to help member Groups meet the challenge of the next 12 months and the subsequent SNH Review I am pleased to announce today that ADMG will, upon request, carry out an Interim Assessment (a bit like a mock exam) for each DMG using the same approach as the SNH 2016 Assessment. You will hear more of this from Linzi later in the meeting. This is intended to identify the progress that each Group has made since June 2016, which I know to be considerable in most cases, and highlight areas where further work is required. The assessments will be carried out by ADMG nominated consultants and this one-off service will be funded by ADMG, drawing on the donations made to our project fund in 2016. In other words it will be free of charge to member DMGs and I would urge you to use it.

I see this as the first step in using the Assessment process as a means to measure our own progress, not just as a set of parameters by which we are judged by SNH. Linzi will be at the door at the end of this meeting taking the names of interested DMGs so please see her on the way to lunch if you would like ADMG's help with an interim Assessment over this Spring and Summer. We will follow up quickly to discuss who might do your review and get some dates in the diary.

It is perhaps a good time to reflect more generally on how much has changed and where we are headed. As little as five years ago we were only just beginning to hear the term "public interest" in relation to deer management. While it was broadly summarised in the Government document "Wild Deer - A National Approach", and in the Deer Code, little thought had been given as to what it meant in practical terms. That all changed with the first Assessment in 2013 and I am sure we now all understand and accept that, in addition to managing our deer effectively as an economic resource in a way that is sustainable in environmental terms, we must also quantify and demonstrate that what we do has public benefits. This is not confined to deer management, as it applies to land management generally.

After decades when our focus was on working together within DMGs to manage a shared deer population effectively and to meet our own land management targets, essentially an internal function, we must now consider ourselves accountable and are required to be transparent to a greater degree, arguably, than any other land use sector. We have risen to that challenge remarkably well and I for one am proud to be associated with a sector that has embraced change so rapidly and comprehensively, albeit there is much more to do. While some of us may sometimes feel overwhelmed, I know there are many, an increasing number, who have found this more rigorous and outward looking approach to deer management planning interesting and stimulating.

Habitat Impact Assessments are clearly now essential for all DMGs and top priority for next year's Review. SNH has stated that "Demonstrating progress towards delivering HIAs and linking results with cull planning for DMGs with HIA data, will be an important consideration in SNH's 2019 re-assessment of DMGs". Many Groups are already some years into systematic habitat assessments; others still have some catching up to do. Having sat in at a number of DMG meetings I have witnessed some excellent discussions about the information coming back and how to make use of it. There is no doubt that having a better understanding of what is happening to the habitat and how it is affected by the impact of deer and other herbivores is an important area of developing skill for land managers. This additional knowledge also puts us in a much better position to argue our case when faced with sometimes un-evidenced criticism.

I understand that the great majority of DMGs have applied for the one-off £1800 SNH grant to assist with HIA training or other appropriate work. I would urge any remaining Groups to do likewise, through your WMO, as soon as possible. This grant is only available to the end of this financial year, 31st March.

Looking forward to future years, maybe beyond the current uncertainties of Brexit, when perhaps the Scottish Government will have a hand on all the levers of rural policy, it would be easier to plan as land managers if there was a clear national vision as to how we want Scotland to be and to look, say 50 years from now.

That would be a valuable expression of the public interest. We would all know where we stand and what our role is.

Everyone has a competing wish list of course, whether for windfarms, rewilding or the status quo, but there appears to be no clear consensual vision for the future. We have the pieces of the jigsaw but there is no picture on the box and we don't know how to assemble the puzzle.

To give the Scottish Government credit where it is due there are some progressive policies of considerable interest to some in the deer sector, for example promoting forestry and native woodland expansion or peatland restoration, but these are piecemeal and we lack a masterplan and without it we have to continue to fight other interests for our share of the not very big cake. There is still too much compartmentalised thinking.

What we most certainly need is a thriving rural economy and of course that is stated in the Land Use Strategy but it is thin on detail and it is not enough to focus only on tourism and renewables as the way ahead. We need unequivocal support for established economic activity, deer management included. As things stand, some current policies, eg support through SNH for sustainable deer management, contradict others – sporting rates. Incentive on one side; extra cost on the other. Not helpful.

You have probably noticed that the concept of “natural capital” has become central to land management. Pete Mayhew will be presenting on the subject and how it applies to deer management later in the meeting but it relates broadly to non-financial values, mainly, but not exclusively, environmental. There are still those who see our environment as being degraded and who consider deer and those who manage them to be largely to blame. I believe that we are on firm ground to challenge that view. Let's not be slow to admit that there has been some justification in the past for criticism that some deer populations have been kept at higher levels than required to deliver a certain number of stags and a certain number of hinds annually and the income which they generate. Indeed, there are still some areas where there may be too many deer but those of which I am aware are mostly at the periphery of the open hill range, at the interface between hill and woodland or farmland and most of the DMG areas are more or less where they should be.

Deer managers, you in this room, are custodians of natural capital who maintain deer numbers at a level which is environmental impact neutral, or positive, over the great majority of the deer range. Those who want the deer range to be different than it is will always find fault but we are increasingly in a position to justify our management on the basis of evidence gathered within the DMGs.

The other burning issue is of course sporting rates, covered in my leader in the current issue of Scope which is on your chairs. The logic of sporting rates may be hard to see – a highly complex system of local authority taxation, abandoned in the mid 1990s, at least partly because it cost as much to collect as it drew in. It is a further burden that we really do not need but it is unlikely to go away and ADMG's role along with others is to continue to make the case that effective deer management requires support from Government, not additional cost in the form of tax. It is marginal enough financially as it is.

As I have said in my article in Scope, at this first stage of reintroduction the picture is chaotic and inequitable and some businesses for whom deer management is a central activity, including estates, may find it difficult to carry on, as you will doubtless hear in Winston Churchill's presentation at the end of the morning.

There is little chance that the Scottish Government will rescind the legislation, being a land reform measure and therefore an important policy symbol, but there is more work to do with the Regional Assessors in assisting them to adapt the rather crude, banded, acreage based, approach, applied across Scotland as a whole, into something which more accurately reflects local circumstances; also to make use of the allowances for remoteness and other physical constraints. ADMG with others, is closely involved in that process at the moment.

Finally, on this topic, the majority of deer management businesses will benefit from the Small Business Bonus Scheme where businesses with rateable values up to £15,000 are currently relieved of rates entirely and for RVs between £15,000 and £18,000 there is a discount of 25%. However sporting rates within the same business are aggregated with other rateable business activities, for example, self-catering or hydro, in applying the SBBS; also, the 2017 Barclay Review of business rates, commissioned by the Scottish Government, recommended that SBBS be reviewed.

So even for those of you who may not currently have to pay rates under SBBS, we strongly recommend that, if you think your assessment is excessive, you should appeal in case the ground rules change. Appeals must be submitted within 6 months of receipt of an assessment and for those issued in September 2017 you must get your appeal in by 31st March. Appeals can always be withdrawn but they cannot be submitted after that crucial date. If in doubt, appeal. In the meantime, the rates are payable. If your appeal is successful you might get some of it back later.

I would also mention that for those who have not yet received an assessment there will be at least two further phases once the Assessors catch up with their very heavy caseload.

Turning to the Association's routine activity the work of ADMG has continued as usual. We are involved in the Moorland Forum, National Access Forum (thank you Frank Spencer-Nairn for representing the Association), Lowland Deer Network, Country Sports Tourism Group, Scottish Venison Partnership, SQWV Ltd., Deer Management Round Table and Wild Deer Best Practice Steering Group. There is nothing particular to report in respect of most of those on this occasion but they all have active agendas and we do need to be there. Venison does however need a particular mention today and I will ask Dick Playfair to update us under Item 7 on the Agenda and will not spoil his thunder just now.

We have attended numerous meetings with SNH, Forestry Commission and other organisations and Finlay, Dick and I had a good first meeting with Francesca Osowska, the new SNH Chief Executive, last month. Both ADMG and SVP attended a very positive venison summit called by Fergus Ewing on 6 March. We also continue to attend DMG meetings and I welcome invitations to do so.

In 2017 we held our usual Regional Meetings, one at Birnam in June, one at Glenfinnan in August and one in Inverness in November. Thank you to all who attended. And we were as usual at Scone and Moy. We also organised a seminar at Birnam in July, mainly on woodland expansion and peatland restoration opportunities.

Details of this year's meetings programme – a Birnam Seminar on 26th June and Regional Meetings on 6th June, 15th August and 23rd November, will be put up on the website shortly.

Looking back at the to-do list which I read out this time last year we are:

- continuing to promote and support DMG HIAs. We have used some of your project donations to produce some You-tube online tutorials on HIAs, based on the Best Practice Guides. They will be available shortly and we see this as the way ahead to make WDBP more accessible to deer managers. I should mention that the Scottish Venison partnership has also done this in respect of carcase handling and that these films are now available on line.
- We are participating in a reactivated WDBP steering group and are starting a programme of updates and additions to the suite of guides. These are likely to be presented online in future rather than in the weather proof hard copy format with which we are familiar.
- SWARD I am afraid is still in the melting pot being with SNH for technical testing; I cannot currently put a date on it but it should be a useful tool which would greatly help in processing the data we gather in respect of deer and HIAs.
- We have been working with SNH on new geographical areas where collaborative deer management is needed – perhaps half a dozen potential new Groups in the offing.
- and the other areas of work and development are covered by my earlier remarks.

Finally, and as ever, my thanks to all members of the Executive Committee. I have had great support from those whose brains I pick on a regular basis. And of course, my particular thanks to my Vice Chairman, Randal Wilson, to Finlay as Secretary for keeping me right and to Dick for the website, PR and Scope, and I would incidentally particularly commend the new issue which is on your chairs. It is in my view our best yet and contains a lot of excellent material – the journal of a forward looking and innovative red deer sector. Particular thanks also to Linzi who is undertaking more and more work for ADMG and I would also mention Victor Clements who has given a lot of time to creative thinking and specialist advice. And of course, my thanks to you for your support and for coming today. ADMG is there to help you and feedback from our members is always welcome.