

Photo: Laurie Campbell

SECTOR SHOULD EMERGE WITH DUE CREDIT AT 2019 REVIEW



Richard Cooke, Chairman
Association of Deer Management Groups

While it is customary for organisations to report a busy year past, and 2018 has certainly been an extremely busy one for ADMG, it has been a year where our workload has been mainly behind the scenes. 2019 is likely to be more outward facing as our role will, as in 2016, be to ensure that the red deer sector is fairly represented in the 2019 Scottish Government Review. These triennial reviews appear to come round very quickly and are something of a distraction from the demands of implementing our Deer Management Plans. We have made the point that a longer cycle would be more realistic.

Much time has been spent in ongoing discussions with SNH intended to achieve clarity on what is expected of Deer Management Groups and how progress is to be measured through the Assessment process. ADMG's intention is to avoid any misunderstandings and to ensure that the considerable and continuing progress by DMGs is fairly represented. See Finlay Clark's report on these negotiations on page 3 of the Review.

The Deer Working Group, set up by Roseanna Cunningham after the 2016 Review to recommend where improvements might be made to the system of deer management, is due to report next spring. At this stage it is not known what may emerge from this but any recommendations are likely to be considered at Government level alongside the SNH Review report.

The 2018 DMG Health Checks were a considerable undertaking for ADMG and it was very pleasing that all Groups took up this offer. My thanks to those who generously donated to the ADMG Project Fund which enabled us to fund two days of consultant time for each DMG. A list of consultants available for DMG and other deer and habitat work is available on the ADMG website.

The Health Checks mirror the SNH Assessment process and they have clearly been helpful in identifying for each Group areas requiring attention before the spring. Many improvements can be easily achieved to turn a red or amber into a green, for example, just by ensuring that DMG websites are up to date. The consultants' approach was rigorous and the SNH WMOs have had an opportunity to comment on the individual scoring so we can have reasonable confidence that the process is a realistic prediction of the 2019 Assessments, subject to further improvements over the next few months. A summary of the Health Check process by Victor Clements can be found on page 2 of the Review.

There have been considerable developments on the venison front over 2018 these being summarised by Dick Playfair in Scope.

Sporting rates continue to be a source of confusion and concern. I have represented ADMG on a joint working group coordinated by Scottish Land & Estates which has worked closely with Regional Assessors to develop an agreed valuation methodology and which has coordinated the appeals process. Many owners have submitted appeals and the first of these were due to be called in Highland Region in December. These have either been continued into 2019 or have been negotiated informally. A pattern of agreed valuations reflecting individual circumstances is likely to become apparent early in 2019.

A number of DMGs have commented on the extra time and cost involved in all that is now considered to be the function of a Group – more meetings, DMP development, Habitat Impact Assessments etc. There is no question that the level of scrutiny has increased over recent years but we cannot turn back the clock and many in the sector have commented that the more systematic and evidence-based approach to deer management is both helpful and interesting. Tom Chetwynd will present a case study on DMG costs at our AGM on 28 February 2019.

I wish you all well in 2019, a critical year. So much progress has been made by DMGs since the last Review that I am confident that the sector will emerge with due credit.

THE 2018 ADMG HEALTH CHECK ASSESSMENT



Photo: Laurie Campbell



Victor Clements

During 2018, ADMG carried out a 'health check' assessment on 44 Deer Management Groups involved in the 2016 review. It was a significant undertaking, with most Groups being covered

by Linzi Seivwright and myself and the remainder being undertaken by Colin MacLean, Cathy Mayne and Mike Cottam.

The purpose of the exercise was to give feedback to Groups on where they are prior to the review in 2019, hopefully ensuring that there would be no surprises. Groups were given feedback on their individual situation, and a list of action points provided to help them prepare for the review process.

It became very apparent during the process that almost every DMG had areas of strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes this depended on the personnel involved and their capacity and interests. Sometimes the sheer physical nature or location of the DMG provided advantages or problems which were difficult to overcome. The assessment process is good at

picking out the different issues in different areas. This should make it easier for both ADMG and SNH to target time and resources in future, and to present a much more balanced argument on deer in the Highlands.

Going forward

A key message from the health check process is that DMGs are continuing to improve against both the Benchmark and the public interest criteria, despite the assessors deliberately marking quite harshly. In 2014 there were many low scores in the assessment as most DMG areas did not have time to articulate many of the new criteria. There was a lot of red at that time. It was supposed to be 'self-assessment'. By 2016, much of the red was gone, and a lot of amber converted to green. This time, the final say was given by SNH. It was a tougher process. The significant change evident in 2018 is that most of the tail end of poorer DMG areas has now been removed, and this reflects the efforts of ADMG, private consultants and SNH who have targeted their resources in helping these Groups over the past two years which is good.

Two other noticeable changes since 2016 have been the increased capacity that many Groups now have, and the insistence by SNH that actions have to be recorded and evidenced. The process has got more difficult again, and we need to think about how to deal with that to avoid drift in future.

Changes

There has been a lot of change. Many Groups are doing better and, yes, there are some Groups that are a bit complacent as well and that need to be paying more attention now. The changes also point to significant inconsistencies in scoring by SNH in 2016, and that needs to be resolved if the credibility of the assessment process is not to be undermined.

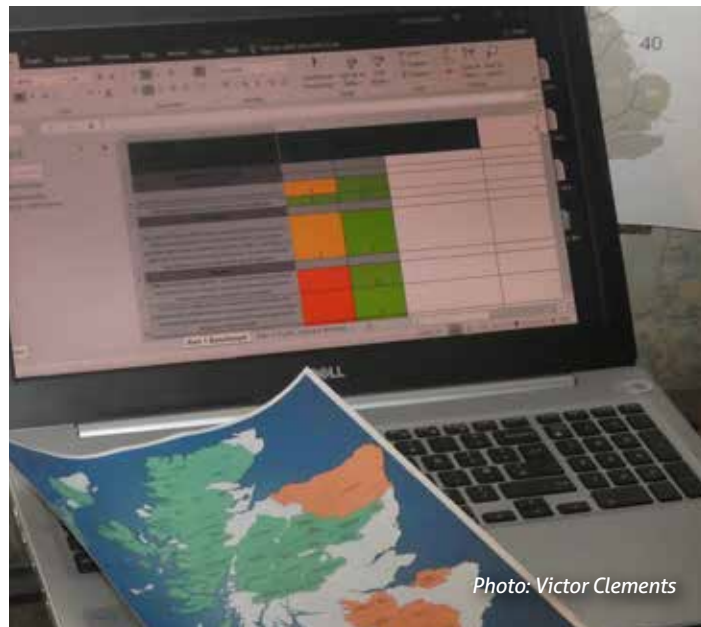
Key message

The key message for DMGs from the health check is to record what you are doing. Simplify your Deer Management Plan by producing a short Action Plan and update this after meetings and keep your web pages up to date. Deal with your problems as they arise and don't ignore them. Most importantly, be positive about what you are doing, and emphasise your strengths and achievements. Good training levels, habitat monitoring and communications all feature heavily within the assessment process. Get these right and you will do well.

If you are struggling with an issue, speak to ADMG or to a consultant or to one of your neighbouring DMGs and they will help you deal with it. All the Groups are learning from each other in this, and we should be in a good overall situation for later this year if we continue to do that.

Victor Clements is a Perthshire-based woodland advisor and is a member of the Executive Committee of ADMG

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PROPER PREPARATION PREVENTS POOR PERFORMANCE

There is of course a six 'P' version which is often quoted and which I think focuses the mind a little better.



Finlay Clark,
Secretary, ADMG

The 2014 and 2016 reviews of Deer Management Groups conducted by SNH at the behest of Scottish Government resulted in what I would describe as "less than satisfactory outcomes." I am sure some will question whether my view is "impartial" but I do believe our sector was harshly scored and poorly judged. I liken the Review process to that of sitting an exam. It is critical you know what the subject matter is, that you understand how it is going to be scored, you broadly know what the questions are going to be, and you focus your resources on those areas which score the best marks. I believe we prepared well in 2014 and 2016 but when the exam paper came out we did not quite recognise a lot of what was expected! The results may be history now but we need to learn from the experience and ensure that we are not caught in the same situation again.

As you will have read in the Chairman's Report, much of ADMG's work over the past year has been focused towards ensuring that the DMGs are prepared for the forthcoming review. We are delighted virtually all took up the opportunity of the ADMG Review Health Check which I believe puts us in good shape for the review later this year. However, we must also prepare SNH for the review. We have worked closely with SNH at all levels, including its CEO, to ensure that come the review itself there will be no surprises, no unreasonable expectations and that we have not been set up to fail. This work is ongoing but I believe we have made good progress. I believe that if we fail then SNH has failed also and where do we go from there?

I think that almost every DMG is well prepared for the 2019 review. Without question there is work to do but I believe we are in a good place to deliver. I stress the importance of the five or six "Ps".

If you feel you require additional support from ADMG then please do get in touch. 2019 is critical to our industry. We want to be given the praise as a sector I believe we deserve.

SNH – VALUED RELATIONSHIP WITH ADMG AND RESULTING PROGRESS AS BUSY YEAR FOR DEER SECTOR GETS UNDERWAY



Robbie Kernahan,
Head of Wildlife Management, SNH

It is not just deer that are regularly in the spotlight these days. The political spotlight at least will once again shine on deer managers and SNH in 2019. The Deer Working Group, which has been tasked by the Scottish Government to review how the system works in Scotland, will report in the spring, the review of the Deer Code will be laid before Parliament in the summer and SNH is due to report to the Cabinet Secretary on wider progress in the autumn.

We work closely with ADMG, as the representative body of local DMGs, and my reflections are that generally we have a solid, constructive working relationship. That is not to say we agree on everything all of the time – but we value the opportunity to have regular and open dialogue to test, challenge and work through some of the more difficult issues which ADMG is tackling, on behalf of its membership.

There is no doubt we continue to see an increased expectation being placed on deer managers – maybe more than any other part of the land management sector – to deliver effective deer

management, which delivers benefits across a range of public policy, but particularly to the environment and biodiversity. ADMG and its members have a significant role to play in demonstrating the benefits they are providing for people and nature.

In recent years we have worked together with ADMG on some significant pieces of work which have sought to raise the bar in terms of how we manage deer in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. This work has taken a range of forms through supporting Groups in developing or updating their deer management plans, measuring progress, facilitating local solutions, embedding Habitat Impact Assessment as a key part of deer management planning and improving the openness and transparency of how DMGs operate.

Deer are of huge economic and cultural importance to Scotland, as well as being one of our best loved native mammals. The Scottish Government has given all land managers – private, public, community and NGO – a responsibility to manage their deer for public benefit, and SNH, working closely with ADMG, is committed to helping everyone meet that responsibility. We really value that relationship and the progress that has been made as a result.

THE EVOLUTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT PLANS



Dr Linzi Seivwright

They say the only time you should ever look back is to see how far you've come. When the challenge was set by the Environment Minister in 2014 for all DMGs to have an effective deer management plan in place within two years, the sheer scale of the task, the expectation and the scope that these plans would have to cover was, for many, understandably quite daunting. It's not that the concept of deer management planning was in any way new. Since Henry Evans pioneered the gathering of information to help inform deer management on Jura in the late 1800's, those entrusted with the stewardship of Scotland's wild deer herd have long since demonstrated the ability to gather useful data and work together. However, the weight of expectation that these 'new' plans would have to deliver the concept of 'public interest' required stalkers, owners and managers alike to step up to the mark and for some, to embrace an entirely new way of working.

However, step up to the mark they did. We now have Deer Management Plans covering 3.5 million hectares of the red deer range resulting in management that focuses much more widely than on just the deer herd. In considering the public interest, most have now evolved into landscape-scale land management plans that address a broad range of objectives linked to the wider environment, and the social and cultural context of sustainability.

The practice of tomes lying forgotten on a dusty shelf has been replaced with dynamic working plans, that rely on continually updated information to inform adaptive management. Relations are strengthened by greater community involvement and collaborative working. Stalkers, equipped with not just instinct but skills and knowledge, are on their knees assessing the health of the land as well as the health of the deer population. There is no doubt that deer management has evolved - and we should all take great pride and confidence in just how far we have come.

Linzi Seivwright is founder of ecological consultancy Caorann and a member of the Executive Committee of ADMG

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