



SCOTLAND'S UPLAND DEER MANAGEMENT

**The voluntary approach:
rising to the challenge**

At a time of review of upland deer management, our view is that the sector, under the voluntary principle, is not just doing its job, but doing it well and leading by example.



Empowering decision making at a local scale

ADMG asserts that sustainable deer management is most effective when land owners and deer managers are empowered to make informed collective deer management decisions based on local circumstances and priorities.

The uplands of Scotland are a living, working, landscape. The increasing diversity in land management objectives means there is no one-size-fits-all in deer management and an integrated approach is essential.

There are now 48 Deer Management Groups (DMGs) with Deer Management Plans covering just over 3m hectares of the red deer range, mainly in the uplands of northern Scotland. Since the publication of the ADMG Benchmark in 2014 DMGs have been regularly assessed against criteria for effective collaboration and planning and 87% of Groups scored >90% in the 2019 Assessment as compared to 36% in 2016.

Adaptive management

Adaptive management implies taking account of change: change in terms of global factors such as climate; and site-specific changes such as environmental condition or land use changes at local scale, for example a woodland expansion project or removing a sheep stock.

Overall red deer numbers are showing a reducing trend since 2000 and are now estimated to be at an average density of less than 10 per km². The annual cull has risen to over 22% of the population. Approximately 300,000 red deer share their open hill range with 600,000 breeding sheep, and there are now less of both species than for several decades.

Responding to the climate emergency

The climate emergency affects us all and the deer sector is better placed than many to make a contribution, as it is already doing.

As the SNH 2019 Assessment of DMGs clearly shows, Groups have identified opportunities for woodland expansion, native woodland improvement and peatland restoration and DMG members are committed to contributing to the challenging Scottish Government targets for each of these important measures which will make real inroads on carbon sequestration/net zero targets.

Some suggest that reducing deer numbers alone can secure future woodland expansion without fencing. This would require a large-scale cull of more than half of our native red deer population in many areas. Large numbers of sheep would also need to be removed and such change would have major implications for jobs, communities and businesses, all of which would decline after an initial national deer reduction cull.

ADMG supports the principle that fencing should continue to be regarded as a vital temporary tool in securing woodland establishment and restoration where herbivores include not just deer but also sheep, goats, hares and rabbits.

It is possible to have both expanding woodlands **and** maintain a deer population that provides significant economic and social benefits.

Currently there are 2,500 full and part time jobs in deer management which contributes £141m annually to Scotland's rural economy.

Native woodland targets met

An independent analysis of the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (NWSS, 2006 – 2013) data for non-designated native woods was commissioned by ADMG in 2019.

This shows that the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS) native woodland condition target to increase the amount of native woodland in good condition to 60% from 46% (as identified by the NWSS) was met overall across the DMG areas.

Analysis of all DMGs indicates that there were 100,914ha of native woodland, 66% of which was classified as being in satisfactory condition (low or moderate herbivore impacts) by NWSS. This was overlooked in the SNH 2019 report on the deer sector.

DMGs have also contributed to the achievement of the SBS native woodland creation target of 10,000ha of new native woodland, the 5 year average being 3,300ha per annum.

Peatland

Since the Peatland ACTION project started in 2012, DMG members have been involved in the delivery of restoration work on over 19,000ha of peatland habitat.

Seven DMGs are involved in landscape scale peatland projects, and future peatland opportunities are being considered across the DMG area.

Food and tourism

Venison is promoted as the healthiest of red meats and the market needs steady supply. There has been recent significant public and private investment in the supply chain, a new venison strategy and food safety campaign.

Regarding wildlife tourism, deer remained "top of mind" in the 2017 SNH Scottish Nature Omnibus as the wild animal most associated with Scotland.





Regulation

Possibly no other rural industry in Scotland is as regulated, scrutinised, governed by codes and subject to regular public review, but our current system sets an excellent example of voluntary cross-boundary collaboration for other land uses.

The next five years

We understand that, like all land managers, we are publicly accountable and wouldn't have it any other way. We will more than play our part in responding to the climate emergency, in safeguarding the environment and building on natural capital, and in taking account of the hazard that deer can be on roads.

DMGs, with their unique experience of collaborative management under the voluntary principle, can and will lead by example, working closely with Agencies, stakeholders, local communities and all other interests in further developing an integrated and holistic approach to land management and the economic and recreational activities this supports.

The wheel of change spins ever faster but the sector has shown its ability to respond and adapt to new challenges and public expectations while continuing to deliver good deer welfare and employment in remote areas where there are few alternatives.

Not part of the problem; part of the solution.

*Photographs:
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December 2019