

Note for ADMG on line meeting – 18 November 2020

Richard Cooke, ADMG Chairman

Covid

Covid has brought many frustrations and concerns over the course of this year, not least the necessity of meeting only on line, as we are today, a poor substitute for our usual round of regional meetings, seminars, events such as Scone, etc. And, of course, our AGM on 18 March was a casualty, eventually replaced by a virtual meeting on 8 July which a good number of you attended.

You will be aware that we worked with other organisations in the field sports sector to produce advice, approved by the Scottish Government, as to how to carry out shooting, stalking etc Covid-safely and I hope that many have found this useful in making arrangements suitable to your own situations.

We also carried out two Covid impact surveys. Firstly, in June, to assess the likely impact of no stalking at all being possible this year, which seemed at that time like a real possibility. We extrapolated from the sample of responses a total value of £9m being at risk across the red deer sector from the loss of stalking income, not including venison, and not including the downstream impact on local businesses.

Then in late September, on the introduction by the Scottish Government of the single household rule which affected self-catering, and the rule of six which applied to staffed lodges, we did a further quick impact survey. Although this elicited only 34 responses in the short time available, including a number of the bigger estates, it threw up an actual loss of stalking and accommodation rents due to actual cancellations totalling £1.1m for those respondents alone.

Both of these surveys provided us with the ammunition to write to the Scottish Government to ensure their awareness of the impact on our sector, including the risk to the cull if lost income were to lead to any loss of jobs. We have in fact written to Ministers no less than five times over the summer and, while this has not led to any specific financial support, at least our difficulties have been acknowledged by Mairi Gougeon and Fergus Ewing, and to a lesser extent by the Finance Secretary.

During the lull between the Covid peaks we have been able to conduct a stalking season, certainly not as normal, but my understanding is that the stag cull has mostly been achieved, albeit likely with a degree of shortfall as yet not known, but certainly with a serious loss of income to many of us through cancellations. It was feared early in the summer that we might not be able to get culled stags uplifted but in the event they have gone away, albeit possibly mainly into cold store.

I have not at this point referred to the impact of Covid on venison as Dick Playfair will cover that in detail shortly and will, I hope, be able to report some good news on Govt. support.

The cull

You have heard it from ADMG on several occasions previously, and indeed from NatureScot, but let me emphasise the necessity of carrying out a full hind cull to achieve agreed DMP cull targets. We received some commendation in the 2019

SNH Report for the concerted efforts across the sector to reduce deer densities where necessary, to an average which is now below 10 per sq. km. May I again commend that as a remarkable achievement by all of you. ADMG was very pleased to be able to support that major leap forward financially, with contributions to consultant costs and DMG Healthchecks. However, we must not be complacent; much more is expected of us going forward and we must not let all our hard work unravel by allowing deer densities to increase again, particularly on the back of a generally high calving in 2020 leading to increased recruitment.

DWG

That brings me to the Deer Working Group Report and its 99 recommendations to the Scottish Government, one of which is a target deer density of 10 per sq. km. which, as noted, we have already achieved as an average. Much time has elapsed since the Report was published early this year, and other events have occupied our minds, but this has not gone away. I understand that the Government means to publish its initial view before the end of 2020, and we must wait to see what that will be. I cannot see it leading to any significant change before the May 2021 Holyrood elections, but we must look out for any proposals for new deer legislation in party manifestos. Some of the DWG recommendations are potentially far reaching and will, if implemented, take us into a more regulated environment with less emphasis on the value of DMGs, less budget for deer counts and more pressure for reductions in deer numbers to support the climate and biodiversity agendas.

ADMG will continue to uphold the importance and value of the voluntary basis of red deer management, using the immense progress which we have all made as a clear demonstration of its effectiveness. A more regulated, more expensive, less flexible, one-size-fits-all, approach would not be in anybody's interest but as we all know there are many voices advocating just that, including at Holyrood. As always there is more to do and we should not expect to be left alone, as we might wish, to get on with managing the deer and our land for the multiple public and private benefits which that brings.

And I would emphasise, not for the first time, the major role which we as a sector can play in addressing climate change both at landholding level and through our DMGs. We can make a major contribution to restoring natural capital. Most of Scotland's peatlands and potential woodland expansion land lie within the area covered by the DMGs, just short of half the land area of Scotland, and it is heartening to recognise how much has already been done, albeit a small fraction of the ScotGovt targets. Projects are continuing to come forward at an increasing rate, albeit somewhat constrained by a shortage of skilled contractors as well as delays in funding availability, both of which have been a cause of frustration. One suggestion that we have made to Peatland Action is that training and grant funding might be made available to individual estates to enable them to do their own peatland work. That would make more practical sense and be better value for public money than to have over committed contractors tramping over peat wetlands during the most difficult months of the year.

Deer management and the media

Following on from what I have just said about the uncertain political outlook, it is important for us all to remember how easily the relatively favourable picture painted by the 2019 SNH Report can be fractured if the collaborative spirit which works effectively through the DMGs, despite some internal tensions and difficulties, is seen to fall apart. Those who want a state regulated deer control system are only too pleased to jump on situations where joint working fails as evidence that the voluntary principle does not deliver in the public interest.

There have been some situations, I am not naming names, where breakdowns in communication and cooperation within DMGs have been widely exposed in the media. While the circumstances leading to that may be individually understandable, it is damaging to us all for dirty linen to be aired in public and really, despite all difficulties which may arise, eg due to potentially incompatible deer management objectives within DMGs, we have no alternative but to sort these out among ourselves. Indeed, I don't believe such situations would be any more easily resolved by diktat under State control. ADMG can endeavour to help in such situations by providing an independent mediator to help to broker agreement. We have done that for a number of Groups over the years, sometimes by providing a short term interim external Chair, and will be pleased to continue to offer that support where it is needed and wanted.

Of much recent concern in the media has been an apparent incident on film where best practice standards appear to have been compromised. I won't be more specific than that as the full circumstances are a matter of conjecture. What I would say as a general lesson is that, familiar as it may be to all of us, the final moments of an animal shot with a rifle, if widely shared on social media can seem very shocking to those unfamiliar with Nature red in tooth and claw. Such exposure again draws unwelcome attention to what we do, in an unfavourable way capable of media misrepresentation. The lesson is that we should be very wary of self-glorifying hunter videos, indeed of social media generally.

Summary and thanks

For those on this call who are ADMG Executive Committee members, I apologise that we have not met for some time, due to present circumstances. We normally get together in January to prepare for a new year and for the AGM and we plan to do that as usual in 2021. Hopefully the second wave may have receded by then and we can meet physically. Indeed, the same applies to the AGM itself. We will plan for that to take place as usual in late February or March but may have to postpone again depending on the situation at that time.

I would add that we recognise that this year it has not been possible for ADMG to be as visible and accessible as usual and we intend to commit more time to direct involvement at DMG level. We are very well served by our regional representatives but, using the advantages of Zoom meetings for the next few months at least, the Vice Chair, Tom Turnbull, and I would like to sit in on and report to as many DMG meetings as possible. Please therefore include us in your email circulation (many but not all do so) and let us know meeting dates so that we can join you, if invited.

Finally before we proceed to the rest of the agenda I would just summarise 2020 for ADMG thus far as being a very busy year, not in the usual way of regional meetings, Birnam seminars, Scone, Moy, attending DMG meetings, meetings with agencies etc, but as one of trying to read the implications for deer management of the unprecedented situation in which we have found ourselves and to advise and support you accordingly. So there has been lots of work behind the scenes, developing advice for the sector and responding to individual enquiries, many meetings on Zoom, 4 with NatureScot, 2 with FLS for example, and regular issue of updates on e-Scope.

My thanks to colleagues for a lot of time and effort in all of that and my particular thanks to you in the DMGs for holding your nerve and making the best of an extremely challenging situation which has presented and continues to present real threats to some jobs and livelihoods and to businesses for whom stalking and venison income is critical. I would also like to record my particular thanks to Helen Polley who has recently left Bidwells to take up a new position but who has provided great support to me as well as to Finlay and has been the measured voice on the telephone for many of us over the last 15 years.

Now moving to the rest of the agenda, we will cover the usual formalities fairly quickly and I hope you will find the updates from Nature Scot and the Scottish Venison Association informative. I would also commend Linzi's item – future proofing the deer sector, which expands on some of the points which I have just made. I also much look forward to hearing Harriet Donald of the Scottish Land Commission who will fill in the gaps in our knowledge about the proposed Regional Land Use Partnerships and perhaps suggest where DMGs might play a role.

There will be an opportunity for questions at the end. Some may have been sent in in advance and questions can also be submitted during the course of the meeting on the chat function on your screens. We will select as best we can to ensure that all topics are reasonably covered in the time available.

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