

ADMG Zoom meeting – 3 March 2021

Richard Cooke, Chairman, Association of Deer Management Groups

Good Morning and Welcome to this 4th online meeting of ADMG. This would normally be our AGM date, but we have decided to put that off due to Covid, as we did last year, and we will hope to be able to hold a physical AGM in June or July. We will circulate details when we see how the lockdown exit process goes from here.

The ongoing 2019 Deer Review is now well into its second year. We understand that the Scottish Government intends to publish its initial view of the Deer Working Group report in early March and I had hoped that we might have seen it by now so as to be able to comment at this meeting, but no, not yet. I suspect that whatever it says may be reflected in the manifestos of some of the parties prior to the election in May and we will just have to wait and see where the new Government takes the deer review from here and whether to expect any legislative action in the next Parliament.

The 2020/21 hind season is of course now finished although there will doubtless still be some culling going on under authorisation. Weather and ground conditions over the last few weeks of the season were pretty awful and will undoubtedly have taken a toll on the deer, indeed reports are already starting to trickle in of mortalities and there may indeed be more if there is further snowfall or a late wet spring.

It has been said by some, and not least in the DWG Report, that winter mortalities are an indication of poor welfare – insufficient access to shelter, under-culling etc. I am sure we all find that conclusion objectionable and irrational, but it suits the views of some. What we know and should not be afraid to say is that a wild species will suffer natural mortality when conditions are such as to make feeding and movement to shelter impossible, regardless of numbers or density. What we also know is that, as deer managers, our role is to mitigate the risks of winter deaths by selecting the older and weaker and more susceptible individuals and by culling to a management plan which delivers a sustainable deer population. I know well that that is exactly how you all operate.

I am sure that no reminder is needed that it is lawful to shoot deer out of season for welfare reasons when we observe individuals in poor condition with little prospect of recovery and I would commend you to actively seek out such animals to minimise suffering. I would also suggest that where you know there are carcasses close to footpaths or a public place, that they should be removed. If experience in 2020 is anything to go by, there will doubtless be an influx of people to the countryside when the lockdown comes to an end and we should have in mind the sensibilities of those who do not understand the natural process of life and death in wildlife.

Incidentally, I am not suggesting that it is realistic to recover and dispose of all carcasses and indeed we know that deer carcasses provide food for other species and return nutrients to the ground but do please think about removing carcasses that are likely to offend. Before leaving this point, we have had an exceptional winter in recent comparative terms and, in order to make accurate adjustments to DMG population models, it is particularly important to gather accurate mortality records and report them to your DMG.

An irony of the snowy conditions in February is that they were perfect for accurate counting whether on the ground or from the air but because access to the hill has been impossible in many places and because the NatureScot count programme had to be suspended due to Covid, that chance has unfortunately been missed. I believe NatureScot do intend to do some counts and Donald Fraser will doubtless enlighten us about that later.

Finally, before introducing our speakers this morning I wish to say something about SQWV, the venison quality assurance scheme in which most of you participate. I am not telling you anything you don't know in saying that there have been problems with SQWV over the last 18 months. As your representative on the SQWV Board it must be said that this is most unsatisfactory. Broadly the problem has been with the independent QA provider, Lloyds Register, which supervises many QA schemes and for which the Scottish wild venison industry is apparently a low priority. They have had staff departures without replacements, problems with the labelling scheme and a general breakdown in confidence. It is a specialist field and finding an alternative organisation is difficult but, following discussion at a Board meeting last Friday we believe we have identified one and, subject to negotiation of terms, we are hopeful of having a new company, SAI Global Assurance Services, in place before the start of next season. You will be kept abreast of developments.

Venison producers have not had the service they deserve from SQWV over a particularly difficult year. Nonetheless the Scottish Quality Wild Venison Scheme remains in place and is vitally important in demonstrating the professionalism and high standard of our venison production. So, I would ask you to stick with it and hopefully things will be back to where they should be in 2021.

I should also say something about likely new constraints and controls covering the export of deer trophies from the UK into the EU; an effect of Brexit. You may recall that the UK Government carried out a consultation on the import and export of sporting trophies at the end of 2019. This set out various options, including an outright ban, being really directed at the import of trophies from endangered species – the “Clarence the Lion” scenario - rather than the UK export of deer trophies. While any new restrictions have not so far been introduced, separately, due to Brexit, it is likely that any red stag or other deer heads being taken by visiting hunters from Scotland to European states, will require a health certificate signed by a designated vet. This would add considerable extra bureaucracy, delay, and some cost. The picture is still emerging, but we will provide further information when available. BASC has produced a helpful advice note to which we will provide a link on e-Scope.

Finally, the new issue of Scope is now on the website. We are not doing a printed version in current circumstances. There are lots of interesting articles in this winter issue and I commend it to you. You will find it under the “publications” tab on the ADMG website at the top of the list.

<https://www.deer-management.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/18786-Scope-Newsletter-A4-12pp-220221.pdf>

Now, we have a full programme of speakers to talk to us over the next hour or so. We will follow the usual procedure of taking questions at the end and Tom Turnbull will chair a panel of the speakers, himself included. You are on mute and I would invite you to submit questions and comments as we go along by way of the Q/A function on your screens. We will gather those up and put as many as we can to the Panel within the time available.