

Thoughts about the future role of DMGs/ADMG

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Deer Management Groups have come a long way in a very short space of time, but we have to be in no doubt that further challenges and inevitable changes lie ahead. The imminent announcement of the Scottish Government response to the Deer Working Group Report will be the first step in this process and ADMG will very shortly have to carefully consider its response.

The three rounds of the assessment process have already accelerated a change in deer management planning that may have been unthinkable ten years ago. We will none the less receive added pressure in the rural sector, as we are challenged to help remedy the implications of the climate crisis. Deer Management Group members have already demonstrated their awareness of this problem. Deer Management Planning has started to highlight the browsing levels on uplands and woodland and to influence deer culls taken. Travelling through the highlands now it is rare to go far without finding examples of woodland creation and peatland restoration is increasingly common amongst the membership with 19,000 hectares already improved by 2019. ADMGs publication *The Voluntary Approach: Rising to the Challenge* demonstrated the work that we are already doing in the light of climate change.

Anyone who has undertaken or applied for woodland planting, AECS funding, or peatland work will be aware of how time consuming and difficult this can be. With 3 million hectares within our membership and comprehensive deer management plans our members are in a good position to target areas for planting or peatland work and to help accelerate new projects. My own experience is that more of this work may have been done already if the process had been a little more streamlined and greater flexibility provided. One of ADMG's roles into the future will be to further highlight the frustrations and the barriers to this work being undertaken and to try to influence change.

It seems likely that it is not just Scottish Government that will drive change but private investment too. Money may become increasingly available for carbon offsetting and I am sure that some of you will have already been approached by companies that are seeking to invest in the carbon capture market. Land that once would only have been marketed as sporting estates is now being advertised on the basis of their biodiversity, and their carbon offsetting opportunities too. Many already consider investment in the highlands as an opportunity to make a contribution to the fight against climate change. DMGs will have an increasing proportion of their membership that is no longer from a sporting background. This must not be seen as a threat; yes it will mean that we are asked to consider the deer population more closely than in the past, but all DMGs have population models now, we must focus on these to help consider the appropriate culls in terms of the whole DMG.

Changing management objectives of members can have significant implications for neighbours and we must always bear this in mind. Calm sensible discussion will as ever be the name of the game. DMGs should be the forum at which land use changes are publicised and consulted and any member of a DMG should always provide others with advance notice if their objectives are changing or a new project is to be undertaken. We would always encourage this information sharing between neighbours and it is in fact part of many DMG constitutions, but sometimes when communications break down it is played out in the national press and that does none of us any favours.

There is a danger that differing views within some DMGs leads to polarisation. In order to avoid this, we need to listen to others' objectives more, not less. Let's avoid the online arguments that negate nuance and open discussion. We sometimes provide a very easy target for our detractors. Let's discuss, analyse and reach decisions based on evidence not prejudice. Purely focusing on the sporting will do us no favours, equally, focusing solely on the environmental at the cost of everything else will drive people away too.

ADMG will continue to support DMGs through its area representatives and through e-scope and other publications but I think it likely that we may need to engage more closely with our members, and I am sure this is something that we will consider going forward. We must adapt to change or be left behind, and we must strive to provide a united deer sector that is fit for purpose.

DMGs help ensure and promote that deer are managed following Best Practice Guidance and that we hold ourselves up to the highest standards. Our deer managers and stalkers have a wealth of expertise and knowledge, but we need to be able to demonstrate this and be proud of it too. ADMG will continue to support Best Practice Guidance, Scottish Quality Wild Venison, The Scottish Venison Association and other schemes that enable our practitioners to demonstrate our professional competence and to help market our venison.

ADMG will strive to represent the varied interests of all deer managers within the membership. Engagement must continue with Scottish Government, other forums and the wider community. ADMG's work with other organisations has meant that we are able to deliver our message and support our members wherever possible. This will as ever form a large part of our work, and we aim to demonstrate more clearly to the membership the huge amount of work that goes on unseen on their behalf.

The hard work of the last few years has shown clearly the commitment and pride that DMGs take in deer management. An awful lot has been asked of our membership and we have all so far largely risen to the challenge. We now have to look to the future. The green recovery will bring added focus and added challenges, but with that there will be many opportunities. Planting more trees and nurturing our landscape will likely mean that deer management becomes more important than ever. The focus on the environment will after all create more woodland habitats for deer.

Deer Management Planning has seen discussion branch into all areas of upland land management. We are aware that one or two DMGs have re-branded as Land Management Groups. This is undoubtedly a discussion for the future, and we would welcome feedback on this topic from members. Some will be broadly supportive, others perhaps strongly against it. Deer for now are the issue that draws most people to meetings, and we must not lose focus of the crucial role of managing those deer.

ADMG has always championed collaborative deer management. The benefits of regional land management have now been recognised by the Scottish Government with the consultation on the development of Regional Land Use Partnerships and the subsequent recent announcement of five pilot regions, Cairngorms National Park, Highland Council Region, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, North East Region, and South of Scotland. We heard from Harriet Donald at our Autumn meeting the importance that will be placed on this work. The need to work with neighbours on all land management decisions and not just deer is here to stay and opportunities for agri-environmental funding based on collaboration are already in place.

As with all walks of life the use of technology in deer management has evolved at pace. Whether it be investigations into drone and satellite counting for deer or the use of mobile phones to help monitor habitat, these are all things that are heading our way. DMGs should I believe embrace these opportunities to improve decision making when considering population models and setting cull targets, but also to demonstrate the good work that we are doing.

Whilst ADMG have historically been cautious of social media, there is no doubt that it can be a tool for delivering important messages, both to our membership and our detractors. We can use it to balance the really positive stories against the seemingly endless unhelpful pictures of dead deer online. Whilst there is little point in engaging in finger pointing and negativity, I do think we need to consider the benefits of delivering a clear and concise positive message.

I have no doubt that some of you might be sceptical of what I have said but I don't think that any of it signals the end for our sporting deer management or the important heritage that some of us are so proud of. Far from it. I am a stalker myself, but I don't believe that in ten years I will not still be enjoying taking my guests onto the hill in much the same way as I do now. Due to changing management there may indeed be fewer deer but that should be reflected positively in the price that I can demand per stag. We may be selling a sporting experience that is unrivalled across the world, but at the moment, but I believe we may be grossly underselling it. As stalkers we may be asked to consider a wider range of issues than we have in the past, but I believe the management of deer will only continue to be vital.

The recent collapse in the venison price has been a shock to us all but I think we should also be optimistic about the long-term future of venison. Yes, people will likely consume less meat, but we should see this as a great opportunity. If people are eating meat three times a week instead of seven, let's make sure that on one of those days it is venison that they are eating. After all, no other meat can tick all the boxes: lean, organic, environmentally sustainable and tasty. People will I believe be drawn to eating more venison particularly if we can further demonstrate that it is harvested professionally and sustainably. The recent success of many estates that have promoted the local sale of venison is evidence that there is a market place out there.

The uncertainty resulting from Coronavirus, the drop in venison price, and the delay of the Deer Working Group Report has meant planning for the future has been almost impossible. There is however certainty in the knowledge that we will continue to be judged on our delivery in the public interest and in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Land managers are being challenged to make significant changes and ADMG will play a vital role in helping its members navigate what will be a somewhat daunting future, but my own personal view is that it will be rewarding and exciting as well.