

ASSOCIATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT GROUPS ANNUAL REVIEW 2020/21



Photo: Neil McIntyre

A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER WHEN, ONCE AGAIN, THE SECTOR HAS RISEN TO THE CHALLENGE



Richard Cooke, Chairman
Association of Deer Management Groups

The extraordinary circumstances have affected everyone in one way or another. In our wild deer sector Covid-19 brought about the near loss of last year's stalking programme and the collapse of the venison market and impacted heavily on income from stalking visitors.

The Scottish Government's Scottish Country Sports Tourism Restart Fund, after pressure from all quarters, has been helpful to some but many did not qualify because their sporting businesses represented less than the required 75% of their total diversified commercial activities.

UK Government measures were also helpful, but not to all as furlough does not work well for most estates where the seasonal round of duties, particularly for stalkers and gamekeepers, cannot be simply set aside even when most of the normal income stream is lost.

Many DMG meetings have taken place on-line. Most Groups have adapted and have maintained progress and communicated with fellow members. Indeed, a benefit of DMG meetings on Zoom has been that members not resident locally have taken part and attendance has in many cases increased.

ADMG has also adapted and in the last year held three well attended on-line meetings, including our AGM. It is however harder to interact with members as effectively on-line. Our survey in relation to virtual meetings showed a mixed response and we concluded that there may be merit in having a combination of physical and virtual meetings so ensuring the continuing opportunity for those from far away to participate.

Scottish Government response to the Deer Working Group Report

Just before the May election, the Scottish Government responded to the Deer Working Group Report, published with its 99 recommendations at the beginning of 2020. Government accepted 90 and rejected just nine, including that for further change to the closed season for females for now at least, which is to be welcomed.

A robust reaction to aspects of this response followed from several organisations. Government's position we think while broadly acceptant, was relatively non-committal, with a number of the far-reaching recommendations being endorsed in principle only. In effect the outgoing Government has passed the DWG report and the deer sector review to its successor. ADMG responded in detail to the DWG report when it came out in March 2020, commenting on all of the recommendations. Our analysis on our website was considered by Government and taken into account in its response which acknowledged the work and progress of the DMGs, as did SNH (now NatureScot) in its 2019 report on deer management. How we will fare with a new Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Mairi Gougeon, and new Minister for the Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform, Mairi McAllan, we shall see.

The SNP election manifesto indicated intent to implement the DWG recommendations in which it will be supported by the Greens. There is a commitment to consultation, and ADMG will reiterate its opposition to those recommendations where we have a differing view if and as they are taken forward.

Public access

Recreational access has exploded post lockdown as people head to the hills. ADMG continues to support with funding the University of Durham's multi-year Deer Disturbance research on South Chesthill Estate, Glen Lyon. This will provide useful evidence of what many believe to be the effect of human disturbance on deer distribution, habitat impacts and on deer management.

A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER... (CONTINUED)

Venison

The impact of Covid has fallen at a time when much positive progress was being made in growing and consolidating the UK market for wild venison. Credit is due to the Scottish Venison Association, its Chairman and Secretary. Of particular note is their raising the profile of venison considerably with the Scottish Government and delivery of a £50,000 grant for an on-line promotional campaign this spring, postponed from Christmas due to lockdown.

The SQWV scheme has had a difficult year due to Covid and deterioration in the service of its scheme manager whose contract has now been terminated, being replaced by SAI Global promising a much-improved service next season. As ADMG's representative Board member of SQWV, I apologise for any shortcomings over the last season or more.

Non-lead ammunition

Pressure to change to non-lead ammunition is mounting and, as of July 2022, many larger retailers will not accept lead shot carcasses, some already having taken this step. Processors who supply these customers may limit acceptance of lead-shot game. Some doubt remains about non-lead ammunition, but it has been in satisfactory use by FLS for several years and more estates are also using it with few reporting major problems or welfare concerns. There is a conversion cost, but change is imminent whether driven by the market or by our continued adoption of European legislation.



Photo: Neil McIntyre

Common Ground Project

ADMG is undertaking this with a number of other organisations, Scottish Land & Estates, Woodland Trust, Plantlife, CNPA, Trees for Life, and NatureScot. It arose from initial discussions with the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest wanting to contact DMGs in the west from Sutherland to Argyll.

It has been a fruitful new venture so far with the conservation bodies and we have commissioned mediation consultants, the Centre for Good Relations, to survey around 40 participants in the deer sector from all points of view – stalking estates, farming and forestry interests, conservation estates, environmental NGOs and public bodies.

Relations between deer management and other interests have long been bedevilled by suspicion and apparent conflict, but there should be sufficient common interest and respectful cooperation for better joint working. This project will identify points of conflict and make proposals to address them.

And looking forward:

Wild deer and GHG emissions

Further to speculation of the greenhouse gas impact of wild deer and wild assertions made based on sparse scientific evidence it is important to understand better their GHG impact, that of their management, and of the entire venison supply chain. With SVA and NatureScot we intend to commission comprehensive research and the James Hutton Institute has been tasked to undertake a scoping exercise as a basis for design and cost of this.

DMG Assessments

The DWG Report saw no need in continuing to assess DMGs. Although the exercises in 2014, 2016 and 2019 appeared initially burdensome, on balance they have been valuable, albeit longer between assessments may have been advantageous. They provided a means for DMGs to judge their own effectiveness and progress against common standards, the benchmark and public interest criteria.

Our view is there is value in developing a simple means of continuing self-assessment to an industry standard and we have set up a small group to come up with options. This may be accreditation, quality assurance or similar, but the objective is for a system which is both simple and useful.

DeerMap

A data support system for deer management has been fraught with false starts - remember HillDeer and SWARD? Neither of these was quite fit for purpose and were dropped. However, a map-based system, DeerMap, has been developed by the James Hutton Institute and trialled at DMG level. We think this could be re-examined as a DMG data management/analysis support system.

Country Food Trust

ADMG has been in discussion with the Country Food Trust, a charity set up in 2017 to address food poverty by sourcing and providing meals based on lead-free game. Having provided more than two million meals they have been trialling venison, including Scottish venison. CFT could benefit processors as their interest lies in poorer cuts and trim for mincing and further processing. ADMG and SVA are taking forward discussions. The CFT model requires Government funding and fundraising. To date they have been successful in securing support and are campaigning for more to consolidate progress. Using venison to help address food poverty would undoubtedly support the contribution that deer management can make for the public good.

These projects are important to develop our knowledge and promote clearer understanding about what we do, particularly in the climate emergency context. There are costs but ADMG can, through its reserves, invest in these projects, some of which will undoubtedly involve long term commitment.

This year I am standing down as Chairman of ADMG at the AGM. I had hoped for calmer waters with the 2019 Review completed and more certainty as to the future so that we could all get on with the tasks set in our deer management plans. That was perhaps naïve as the review process has been heavily delayed and is ongoing and we don't yet know

how the new Government will reconcile the SNH 2019 Report and the DWG 2020 Report, which are somewhat at odds with each other. There will be much to do in the political sphere over the next few years.

That said, the deer sector has made remarkable progress, as has been recognised by Government, and it's important that that progress, involving an increasingly structured and professional approach to deer management, continues. Collaboration will be more important than ever and, despite the DWG's reservations about the DMG system, there is currently no better example in Scotland of collaborative land management at landscape scale. Furthermore, the public interest at all levels in how we manage our deer is now, and will continue to be, a fact of life. Deer managers have responded to that and to the climate crisis through the roll-out of woodland expansion and peatland schemes across vast areas and have demonstrated that we deliver the public interest every day. Indeed, private management objectives and the public interest are inextricably linked through the provision of rural employment, a healthy environment, deer welfare, and safe healthy food.

I am proud to have been associated with this important period of change. I am convinced that stalking as many of you think of it will continue to have a place in the fast changing and more complex world which we face, albeit perhaps at a smaller scale. Adapt we must but equally we must hold on to the traditions and values of the past.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS: DEER AND THEIR MANAGEMENT



Robbie Kernahan, Director of Sustainable Growth, NatureScot

Covid has hammered home our lack of resilience. The virus has hit every part of our lives – health and wellbeing, education, finances, relationships, family, friends, and prospects. Its reach is global and social inequalities have been cruelly exposed. During the lockdowns of 2020/21 even though many in Scotland came to value being outdoors and securing solace from nature, others simply could not get to decent greenspace. Unfortunately for many of those that can and did, they do not know how to behave when they get there.

There is also the narrative that this pandemic originated from an unhealthy relationship between the human world and the natural world, which can lead to disease jumping and mutating from species to species. This same unhealthy relationship is also contributing to the loss of nature across the globe. Therefore, it follows that ensuring society is more resilient against future pandemics must involve tackling the climate and nature crises.

The two are inextricably linked – two sides of the same coin. Globally, nationally and locally an enormous effort is needed to tackle them.

This importance was reiterated in the recently published Dasgupta Report, an independent review of the Economics of Biodiversity, commissioned by the UK Treasury. It states: "Nature is our most precious asset and we are all asset managers" and also "We are seriously mismanaging those assets, with our demands far exceeding capacity".

So, there it is - the link to nature-based solutions - when thinking about the climate emergency and how best to stimulate a green recovery. The facts of the matter are that as we make progress in decarbonising the energy, transport and housing sectors, as we have been doing for some time in Scotland, the importance of land use comes into much greater focus.

Land use becomes one of the most important areas to tackle existing emissions, but also one of the most important means by which we can mitigate, lock up and store carbon.

The Scottish Government remains committed to ending our contribution to climate change and we have one of the most robust legislative frameworks for emissions reduction in the world.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS... (CONTINUED)



The updated Climate Change Plan, published in December 2020, sets out the actions that chart a pathway. Let's make no bones about it, the challenges in shifting the rural economy away from its dependence on fossil fuels and traditional use of the land and sea towards a nature-rich, net zero economy are significant.

It won't be an easy journey and my overall sense is that the amount of change required to make that transition is scarcely appreciated by many.

To meet that challenge we will require systematic changes to policy and practice and greater urgency and focus if Scotland is to meet its interim net zero target for 2030.

We are in an emergency and, whilst we must not convey a sense of panic, we have got to recognise that and act. Nature is our most precious asset and we now need to 'up the ante', both to protect what we have and indeed to enhance it.

Agricultural reform is underway and there are changes afoot to the regulation and management of our uplands. Policy alignment is key, including the extent to which the Government's commitment to climate change and nature-based solutions drives the Economic Strategy, Regional Economic Partnerships, National Planning Framework, Land-Use Partnerships and Agricultural policy.

I don't underestimate the challenge of achieving that alignment. In the interim there is lots of really good work going on within all of the DMGs to deliver nature-based solutions - woodland creation, peatland restoration, and a wide range of coastal, agricultural, wetland, riparian and upland enterprises which all use nature to help tackle environmental and social challenges.

But we need to do more. As we wake up to the importance of natural capital, we need to place greater value on sustainability and biodiversity. That is why the Scottish Government is ramping up and committing to multi-year investments with £250 million over 10 years on peatland restoration and an additional £150 million over the next five years in forestry to support the economy and our net zero goal.

The Land Use Targets within the Climate Change plan are really ambitious. Can Scotland meet that ambition? The peatland restoration challenge in itself is huge with the aim to restore 250,000 ha of peatland by 2030. That's 25,000 ha per year - and we managed 6,000 last year!

There are big questions around capacity, skills and the sheer scale of the task. It means just about creating an industry from scratch – but with that comes real opportunities too. Nature-based jobs grew at more than five times the rate of all jobs in Scotland over the last 5 years and accounted for one third of all job growth in Scotland in this period. Nature-based jobs are just emerging in some sectors, such as urban green infrastructure and green finance, but these are expected to develop quickly as demand for these roles grows.

Also, the emergence of the carbon market, which is still in its infancy, and the market for ecosystem services which is slightly further behind, mean that there is no shortage of interest from private investors. Banks, institutions, insurance providers and big business are all keen to invest in carbon for a variety of reasons and private finance will be key to help make the transition to net zero. One of the challenges will be to identify the revenue streams for investors (not just from carbon) and link them to those who manage the resource – ie the land.

The Scottish Government remains committed to ending our contribution to climate change within a generation. This year the world is looking to Scotland's leadership on climate action as Glasgow hosts the COP 26 climate summit in November, which marks the most important moment of the international climate challenge since the Paris Agreement was signed in 2015.

Some of the messages that will inevitably emerge from COP15 in China (now rescheduled to October) and COP26 are that we need to shift from a model where we continually extract from nature, depleting it and its capacity to support itself and us, to one where we support nature in a restorative and regenerating economy.

And also, that we, as individuals must take responsibility. The collective, whether it is companies, communities, governments or international institutions, must all step up.

So, it is a time of change – but moving away from high level declarations to meaningful practical implementation. As a sector those in deer management are well placed to step up and deliver. Indeed, many of you already have.

I encourage you all to seize the opportunities that are emerging because there is an urgent need to do so, and NatureScot will continue to provide support as part of the solution to delivering a green recovery.