

Association of Deer Management Groups

Chairman's Report to the AGM on 23 June 2021

Good Morning and welcome to the 29th AGM of the Association of Deer Management Groups. As you know we had very much hoped that this would be an actual meeting at the Drumossie Hotel and although this could have gone ahead within the current Covid rules, albeit limited as to numbers, the current spike in Covid numbers and expressions of a concern from a number of members led to a rethink last week and here we are online for an AGM for the second year running. Not what we would have wanted but it does have the advantage of allowing some to attend who would not have been able to do so in person.

I won't dwell on the extraordinary circumstances of the last year as they are well known to us all and have affected every person across the globe in one way or another. Suffice to say that, in the Scottish deer world, they have brought about the near loss of last year's stalking programme and the collapse of the venison market. Hopefully things may be a little better this year. The Scottish Government's Scottish Country Sports Tourism Fund, very much an afterthought after pressure from all quarters, has been helpful to some rural businesses but many estates did not qualify because their sporting businesses represented less than the required 75% of their diversified commercial activities. The UK Government measures may also have been helpful to some but, furlough, for example, does not work well for most estate businesses where the seasonal round of duties, particularly for stalkers and game keepers, cannot be simply set aside, even with the loss of most of the normal income stream.

I have sat in on a number of on-line DMG meetings and have been much impressed with how well most Groups have adapted to the circumstances and how effectively they have maintained progress and communicated with fellow members virtually. Indeed, a benefit of Zoom DMG meetings has been that members who are not resident locally have been able to join meetings, some for the first time, and attendance has in many cases increased.

As for ADMG we too have had to adapt to the new way of doing things and have now held three well attended on-line meetings, including last year's AGM, this being the fourth. I do however find it difficult to interact with members as effectively as we are accustomed to doing due to the stilted format of a meeting where all attendees are visible at thumbnail size and questions are only possible if submitted in advance or through the "chat" function. We carried out a little survey in relation to virtual meetings and were interested to find responses were of the mixed feelings variety. Indeed, we concluded that there may be merit in future in having a combination of physical and virtual meetings to ensure the continuing opportunity for those from far away to participate. In any event a real meeting will be something of a luxury and hopefully a realistic expectation in the coming months so that we can get back to our regular programme of regional meetings and Birnam seminars.

Just before the recent Scottish election, the Scottish Government came out with their response to the Deer Working Group Report, published at the beginning of 2020, and on its 99 recommendations. It accepted 90 of these and rejected 9, including the recommendation for further changes to the closed season for females, for now at least, which is to be welcomed. There has been a robust reaction to some aspects of this response from a number of organisations while ADMG has done little beyond

acknowledging it. Our view is that the Government response, while being broadly acceptant, was relatively non-committal, a number of the far-reaching recommendations being accepted in principle only. In effect the outgoing Government needed to clear DWG as unfinished business and was simply passing the DWG recommendations and the ongoing deer sector review on to its successor post-election. ADMG responded in detail to the DWG report when it first came out in March last year with comments on every one of the recommendations. Our response is on the ADMG website and we know it was considered by the Government and taken into account in its response which acknowledged the work of the DMGs and the progress made, as also did SNH (now NatureScot) in its 2019 report on deer management following the last round of Assessments.

What lies ahead with the new Government and a new Minister for the Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform, Mairi McAllan, (who will work to the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Michael Matheson rather than the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Islands, Mairi Gougeon), we have yet to see, **but it is to be noted that the SNP election manifesto indicated the intent to implement the DWG recommendations.** We can only meet that challenge when we see it. There is a commitment to consultation, and we will certainly reiterate our significant areas of disagreement with some of the recommendations if they are taken forward. We will be seeking a meeting with the new Minister as soon as possible.

Moving on:

On the subject of public access, which has exploded post lockdown, and deer management, ADMG is continuing to support a multi-year Deer Disturbance Research Project being run by the University of Durham on South Chesthill Estate in Glen Lyon. This will hopefully over time provide useful evidence of what many believe to be the effect of human disturbance on deer distribution, habitat impacts and of course on deer management too. ADMG is funding one of the satellite tracking collars to be put on a hind this year.

I am not going to say too much about the venison market at this juncture as Dick Playfair will be reporting later this morning. I have already referred to the heavy impact of Covid which has fallen at a critical time when so much positive progress has been made in growing and consolidating the UK market for wild venison. I would like to pay credit to the SVA and particularly to its Chairman, Bill Bewsher, and Secretary, Dick Playfair. Of particular note is that they have raised the profile of venison with the Scottish Government and their achievement of a £50,000 grant for a promotional campaign this Spring, albeit postponed due to the January lockdown, is a real milestone.

Dick will also touch on the SQWV scheme which has had a difficult year owing to a real deterioration in the service provided by Lloyds Register the scheme managers. Their contract has now been terminated and they have been replaced by SAI Global, as the name implies a multi-national QA scheme provider. We should look to a much-improved service for next season and as ADMG's representative Board member of SQWV may I apologise for any shortcomings over the last season or longer.

Also, in the news is non-lead ammunition. The pressure to change is mounting rapidly and we understand that, as of July 2022, the multiple retailers will not accept

lead shot carcasses, some aren't already, and that the processors cannot therefore accept them as they will be unmarketable to their mainstream customers. I know there are remaining doubts for many about non-lead, eg copper, bullets but they have been in satisfactory use by FLS for some years and an increasing number of estates are also using them with few reporting any major problems or welfare concerns. There is of course a conversion cost, particularly as some of the smaller calibres, eg .243, are not yet considered satisfactory so for some conversion means a new rifle or barrel; also, copper ammo remains more expensive although the gap is rapidly closing. I would urge you all to look at this seriously if you have not already done so as there is no doubt that this change will be necessary whether we like it or not.

I should mention a project, which we are calling the "Common Ground Project" which ADMG is undertaking with a number of other organisations, SL&E, Woodland Trust, Plantlife, CNPA, Trees for Life, and NatureScot. This arose out of initial discussions with the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest who wanted to make contact with the DMGs down the west coast of Scotland from Sutherland to Argyll. There was an article by Julie Stoneman who chairs the Alliance in the last Scope and Victor Clements has written another excellent piece for publication in the next Scope due to be printed over the next few weeks.

This has been a fruitful new contact with many of the conservation bodies; genuinely cooperative. The group has funded and commissioned mediation consultants, the Centre for Good Relations, to carry out a survey of around 40 participants in the deer sector, coming from all points of view – stalking estates, farming and forestry interests, conservation estates, environmental NGOs and public bodies. Some of you will have been involved.

Relations between deer management and other interests have long been bedevilled by suspicion and apparent conflict, whereas really there should be sufficient common interest and respectful cooperation for better joint working. It is hoped that this project, which is currently ongoing, will identify the points of conflict and make proposals to address them. Certainly, the Scottish Government should find it easier to determine what actions to take in respect of the deer sector in the light of the DWG recommendations if there is a higher degree of collaboration between the relevant interests than has been evident at previous reviews.

May I turn now to our forward work programme. There are a number of important projects in the pipeline which ADMG wishes to initiate or participate in:

- **Wild deer and GHG emissions** - Firstly and of high public profile there has been talk of the greenhouse gas impact of wild deer and some preposterous assertions based on little or no evidence. It is really important, bearing in mind the climate emergency, that we understand the GHG impact of deer and their management. We should aim to understand the emissions, eg of methane, of wild deer living off natural vegetation but we also need to know about the impact of, for example, vehicles and ATVs used for deer management as well as the venison supply chain. We know that NatureScot is looking closely at the emissions associated with helicopter use for deer counting and assessing other approaches, eg drone technology. With SVA and NatureScot we hope to commission a substantial research project to look at all of this, probably over several years. As a first stage the JHI have been

commissioned to carry out a scoping exercise as a basis for designing and costing a project. Dick may have more to say on this.

- **Assessments** – secondly, the DWG Report saw no necessity for continuing to Assess DMGs periodically and took the view that NatureScot staff time on this could be better spent on other matters. That is not the ADMG view. Although the three assessment exercises in 2014, 2016 and 2019 at first appeared burdensome and heavy handed to some, on balance we consider that they have been valuable, albeit a longer interval between assessments would have been more sensible. They have provided a means of a DMG judging its own effectiveness and progress against a common standard in terms of the Benchmark criteria which are to do with the function of DMGs. The public interest criteria have also been useful in firstly raising awareness that deer management, like any other activity, has relevance to the public interest in many ways, and secondly has provided a means to demonstrate in a measurable and transparent way our effectiveness and progress. In short ADMG takes the view that, although NatureScot, as we understand it, will no longer be carrying out DMG Assessments, there is value in developing a modified and simplified means of self-assessment to an industry standard. We have therefore set up a small working group led by the Vice Chairman to look at this and come up with some options for your future consideration. Whether this will be in the form of accreditation, quality assurance or whatever, remains to be seen but the objective will be to develop a system which is as simple, clear and useful as possible.
- **Deermap** – we have had many false starts in coming up with a data support system for deer management. Some with very long memories may remember “HillDeer” back in the 90s, and more recently we have had the promise of SWARD. For various reasons none of these have been quite fit for purpose and have fallen by the wayside. However, a map-based system, DeerMap, was developed by JHI a few years ago and trialled in a DMG, which we think will stand re-examination as a DMG data management and analysis support system. We will be pursuing this over the next year and will hopefully have more to report by the next AGM.
- **Country Food Trust** – we have had recent contact with the Country Food Trust, a charity set up in 2017 in England to address poverty by sourcing and providing meals, including the use of lead-free game. To date they have provided more than 2 million meals. They have been trialling venison, including from Scottish sources, and are of particular interest to our processors in that they look for the poorer cuts for mincing and processing, particularly valuable when there is so much stock in cold storage as a result of the Covid situation. ADMG and SVA intend to continue our discussion with CFT to look for compatibilities with our existing supply chain. I would add that the success of the CFT model requires Government funding and that they have been successful in securing support and are actively campaigning for more to consolidate on a thoroughly worthy cause. I would also add that the use of venison to help to address poverty would emphasise how deer management can contribute to the public good. One or two Scottish Estates

are already contributing to this worthy cause and we are starting to look for a simple format where that can be done on a wider basis.

These projects are important if we wish to continue to develop our management skills and understanding of what we do, particularly in the climate context. There are of course cost implications and, as you will shortly hear from Finlay in his Financial Report we have fortunately been able to build up our reserves, not least, ironically, because Covid has led to some savings on meeting costs, game fairs etc, and are therefore in a position to invest on your behalf in these projects, some of which will undoubtedly involve long term commitment.

As previously advised, I am standing down after 10 years as Chairman of ADMG at this 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 we have set ourselves in our DMG deer management plans. That was perhaps naïve as the review process has been heavily delayed and is still ongoing and, as I said earlier, we do not yet know what the new Government will make of the two reports, the SNH 2019 Report and the DWG 2020 report, which are somewhat at odds with each other. I think it is safe to predict that there will be much to do in the political sphere over the next few years.

What I do know and can say with confidence is that the deer sector has made remarkable progress over recent years, as has now been recognised by Government, and the important thing is that that progress, involving an increasingly structured and professional approach to deer management, will continue. Collaboration will be more important than ever and, despite the DWG 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 and we have responded to that, and in the astonishing and growing response to the climate crisis through the roll-out of woodland expansion and peatland schemes across vast areas, have demonstrated that we deliver the public interest every day. Indeed, our 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 and with all of you. 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 with which we are confronted, albeit perhaps at a smaller scale. Adapt we must but equally we must hold on to the traditions and values of the past.

I would like to add that I have very much enjoyed getting round all the DMGs and meeting so many interesting and dedicated Deer People.

Finally my thanks to the Committee. We have not met physically for over 18 months but it has been invaluable to talk individually and take advice from particular members when required. Thank you specifically to the Vice Chair, Tom Turnbull, to Finlay and to Clare at Bidwells who run ADMG for us all, and to Dick for all he does on the publications and PR front.

Now, moving back to the agenda, we will take questions at the end and please submit these by way of the Chat function as at our previous virtual meetings. Tom

Turnbull will marshal these into sensible order and will direct them to the appropriate speaker. We will do this both at the end of the AGM and again after the two presentations which follow the AGM. And, finally, I am sorry that there is no lunch after the meeting as we would normally provide; please imagine virtual soup and sandwiches.

Thank you.