



The future role of DMGs and ADMG

Photo: Neil McIntyre



Tom Turnbull
Chairman, Association of
Deer Management Groups

There is no doubt that Deer Management Groups face quite a challenge over the next few years. The Scottish Government's response to the Deer Working Group Report is clearly going to bring change and ADMG will have to make sure that it represents its membership robustly through this time. With a range of objectives in each DMG and across our own membership, collaboration can be difficult at times. ADMG's role must be to deliver productive, collaborative deer management, maintaining the momentum of the last few years whilst always remembering that within each member group there will always be a diversity of opinions.

The Scottish Government response to the DWG report also means that NatureScot will have an increased workload in implementing the recommendations. Meanwhile collaborative deer management will be expected to continue. As an organisation ADMG must remain relevant and provide clear guidance to Groups.

The vast amount of work undertaken by DMGs has meant that progress was referred to favorably in the 2019 SNH Review of Deer Management and similarly in parts of the DWG response. However, I believe ADMG needs to consider ways of getting its message out more broadly to those that need to hear it including our detractors and some of our members. The assessment process that all DMGs undertook on three occasions was often time consuming and added

to Group administration costs. But these assessments also clearly demonstrated the ability for DMGs to manage deer in the public interest. With Government suggesting that the assessment process comes to an end ADMG is currently investigating evolution of that process enabling DMGs to take it forward themselves. It should be streamlined and be capable to demonstrate our competence as deer managers well into the future.

The costs involved with running a DMG have rapidly increased in recent years, whilst contributions to ADMG have largely remained the same. Increasing administration costs mean ADMG perhaps needs to do more to demonstrate to its members the work it undertakes on their behalf. Whilst clearly there is a risk from social media I think we might consider its benefits further, not as a place to pick a fight, but as a place to deliver our message. I am often amazed by the number of deer managers on Instagram for example and I think we are the only organisation that does not use this forum. We may also need to consider more regular updates to members and perhaps more direct contact with the Chairmen and Secretaries of DMGs. Zoom has meant that meetings have continued despite the virus but in the future Deer Management Groups may want to consider a virtual element to all meetings. This would reduce travel time - and our sector's carbon emissions - and provide inclusivity to those that have not been able to attend meetings in the past.

The future role of DMGs... (Continued)

Another consideration is the ADMG logo. Several people from a variety of land management backgrounds have mentioned this to me and whether a dead stag remains appropriate. I am sure that there will be a range of opinions over this but we should certainly question whether this is the image now that best depicts the broad spectrum of DMG members, who we are and what we do, or whether portraying ourselves in this manner merely perpetuates a stereotype. It is a question we should be asking our members. Clearly our stalking heritage is extremely important but to those without a stalking background I do wonder how this presents us.

Our members' ongoing role in delivering the climate agenda is something that we have discussed at length both in the recent ADMG Zoom meetings and in the most recent editions of Scope. This has received a very mixed reaction from our membership and there is little doubt that the climate crisis is something that we will be tasked with considering further, Government policy is dictating direction, but private sector interests have a major role to play in delivery of targets too. The often-lengthy and onerous application and reporting process means that some are reluctant to enter into schemes or would think twice about doing so again. ADMG should highlight to NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland and the Scottish Government the problems and barriers its members encounter in the delivery of actions to support the climate agenda. There is no doubt that uptake would have been far quicker if the processes were more straightforward.

The discussion continues around the evolution of some DMGs into Land Management Groups. The breadth of information held at DMG level and contained within deer management plans shows a greater awareness of wider land management than any other collaborative forums in Scotland. Some Groups have already changed their names, whilst others are using land management plans as opposed to deer management

plans. I believe however that deer remain the focus that brings all comers to the table. At two recent DMG meetings that I attended the topic was brought up and at both meetings it was clear that there was a desire to continue as DMGs rather than change at this point. It was felt that there was enough to be done in tackling the subject of deer without widening the remit further. However, I am sure that more Groups will consider this change going forward. It is clearly an area that we should be aware of and think about, and it will be interesting to see how DMGs fit into the proposed Regional Land Use Partnerships.

I think overall that ADMG is in a very good place to continue to lead the way in upland deer management. Most importantly we need to make sure that DMGs continue to be the place where a common purpose of evidence-based, collaborative deer management is discussed. There has been some perceived polarisation recently amongst the membership and this may provide our greatest challenge going forward. But whilst we have the support of the vast majority of our membership and whilst there will be some changes and an inevitable evolution over time, collaboration remains as important as ever.

I could not finish my first editorial for SCOPE without giving a huge thank you to Richard for all he has done both as Chair and Secretary of ADMG for what amounts to 27 years! His contribution and commitment have been enormous during a period of change for all of us. He has been a steady hand on the tiller at all times.

We will be making a presentation to Richard to mark his contribution at a date yet to be specified but we will keep you informed. I am very pleased that for the immediate future he takes over as Vice Chair and will remain closely involved.

The upland deer sector has come a long way and made unprecedented progress in the last 20 years



Richard Cooke
Immediate past Chairman, ADMG

As I stand down as Chair of ADMG at this year's AGM, it is a good moment for me to reflect briefly on what has changed over the last 10 years, and indeed from our beginnings in 1992.

When ADMG was formed, against the wishes and advice of the Red Deer Commission who considered it to be unnecessary, it would have been fair to characterise the new organisation, and indeed those Deer Management Groups (DMGs) which were already in existence, as an informal collecting point for those with a common interest in stalking. It was about deer and little else and DMG meetings were mainly about counts, culls and the venison price, often amid a degree of secrecy and suspicion between neighbours. It is regrettable that we are still characterised in that way in some quarters, a caricature of today's reality.

Change in the early days was gradual, even after the passing of the 1996 Deer Act which brought the environment, alongside agriculture and forestry, into the spectrum of interests which could suffer damage by deer. Our stance was at that point defensive and external changes such as devolution and the accompanying politics did little to alter that initially. However, it became increasingly evident that deer management, impacting as it does on all other land uses, could not continue to be treated in isolation and that, as with farming and other land-based enterprises, a more structured and outward looking approach was required. The process of change really commenced with that realisation from the millennium onwards.

The key components of change have included the emergence of deer management planning – population modelling and more recently habitat monitoring, as well as acknowledgement of the public interest in land management generally and in deer management in particular. This was codified in the Scottish Government's



Richard Cooke hosting a visit to Invermark for Alyn Smith MEP in 2009. Photo: Dick Playfair

policy paper *Wild Deer: a National Approach*, in the DCS/ SNH *Code of Practice for Deer Management* and in the development of *Wild Deer Best Practice*. The right of responsible access introduced in the 2003 Land Reform (Scotland) Act also played a part. ADMG was closely involved with the agencies in these developments and initiated on our part the *Benchmark* for DMGs setting out a blueprint for the effective functioning of DMGs, and shortly afterwards, our *Principles of Collaboration*.

Without turning this into a history lesson there followed the SNH public interest criteria for DMGs, the SNH Assessments for DMGs from 2014, the creation by ADMG of a template DMG constitution, standardised websites for DMGs to meet the expectation of transparency around information and the three-yearly review process introduced following the 2011 Wildlife and Natural Environment Act.

When looked at together all those successive changes represent a long period of constant flux and increasing scrutiny which many of us found difficult to welcome, particularly as deer management, almost uniquely among land uses, does not benefit from public subsidy. However, the cumulative effect has been the professionalisation of deer management at all levels which, while initially burdensome, is now seen by most as having been beneficial. The assessment process in particular, not favoured by the DWG, has been valuable in demonstrating in open view that deer management is an integral and important part of today's rural sector, responsive to the public agenda of the day.

The other major change has been the increasing diversity of deer management objectives. DMGs may typically include, in addition to those with an interest in stalking, conservation estates whether owned privately or by environmental NGOs, community bodies and public agencies as well as agricultural, crofting and forestry interests and, for many of those, deer represent a liability rather than an asset. Naturally this can be a source of tension and potential conflict but in most cases the structured approach to deer management planning has

proved capable of balancing these conflicting demands and providing a basis of agreement based on mutual respect and a willingness to compromise. There is more to be done to find common ground in some cases but at least there is an established approach. Now, in 2021, hopefully emerging from the pandemic, we face many uncertainties. While the SNH 2019 Report recognised and welcomed progress made, echoed by the outgoing Cabinet Secretary, most of the 99 Deer Working Group recommendations, based on a less favourable and in my view outdated view, were accepted by the Scottish Government, in principle at least, and it remains to be seen where that may lead in this new Parliament.

I remain concerned that the top-down directive approach favoured by the Deer Working Group will not be beneficial, nor indeed necessary while progress continues to be made under the voluntary principle. While many of the recommendations are sensible and would rationalise the existing piecemeal, and in some respects, contradictory legislative framework, and indeed many of them are already work in progress, some are of particular concern. Those drawing most current attention relate to changing close seasons and extending the potential for night shooting, but of equal concern is the dismissive attitude of the DWG to the collaborative approach represented by the voluntary DMGs which they do not apparently consider to be essential. I believe that, with the need for concerted action on climate change, collaboration will be more important than ever and the DMGs are ready made for delivering landscape scale change and indeed are already doing so. The collaborative value and work of the DMGs was also recognised by Roseanna Cunningham in her comments accompanying the Scottish Government's acceptance of the DWG recommendations.

In conclusion I believe that it has been to the immense credit of all in our deer sector that so much beneficial change has been achieved in the last decade. We must maintain our momentum, refine our management approaches and innovate where we can so as to continually improve our husbandry of our wild deer.



Rain forests in Scotland

All photos: Victor Clements



Victor Clements

Just as deer management looks different in different parts of Scotland, native woodlands do as well. In recent years Scotland's "rain forest" has been getting a higher profile, also sometimes referred to (by some) as Atlantic woodlands/Atlantic oakwoods/Celtic rainforest. The purpose of this article is to set out what it is and what the relationship to deer management might be.

Scotland's "rainforest"

What is referred to in Scotland as a "rainforest" are those native woodlands growing largely on the western/Atlantic side of the country where the local climate is dominated by rainfall and milder winters. The woodlands themselves are usually growing on fertile, mineral soils, often but not always in more inaccessible or sheltered locations. They are usually characterised by a range of longer-lived tree species such as oak, hazel and ash, but there will be a range of other species as well, including birch, willows and sometimes even Scots pine, holly, wild cherry, elm and a range of other native species may be locally important. Their longer life span gives time for distinctive networks of other non-tree species to grow around them. Because of the high rainfall and sheltered nature of many of these woods, a range of mosses will be readily apparent, both on the ground and on the trees themselves. A range of ferns will also be apparent in some cases, and the range and growth of lichens will often be spectacular. The woods will often feel humid, and if they are north facing as well, then it is not surprising that moss and other plants that grow well in darker, damp conditions will be present.

These woods can be very biodiverse and are certainly distinctive within Scotland. They are very different to Highland birch woods or pinewoods, and to east coast mixed woodlands.

The area of these woods within Scotland is relatively small, about 30,000 hectares or thereabouts, but it depends really on how you define them. The area is about 2 percent of our total woodland area, or about 8 percent of our native woodland area.

A marketing success story

I am not one for hyperbole and retain a sharp degree of scepticism about the "rain forest" label. Most people will simply refer to these woods by their dominant species, be that oakwoods, hazel woods, birch woods or whatever. The "rainforest" tag is a bit of marketing gimmick, seeking to equate these woodlands with tropical rainforests and their central importance to the climate debate. In Scotland, these woods do have the distinctive biodiversity associated with tropical rainforests, but "real rainforests" are important because of their sheer extent around the globe, and it is this huge dominance of the equatorial regions of the planet that give them their real importance. Remember the days when people could cut down an area "the size of Wales" every year and there still seemed to be plenty of rainforest left? Well, it turns out that you cannot do this indefinitely, and rainforest destruction and deterioration in quality is a huge problem now, and apparently getting worse, but all this emphasises the sheer scale of the resource.

The rainforest in Scotland is tiny by comparison, and can never achieve a comparative function, but these are important woods in their own right, valued locally in economic, cultural, landscape and biodiversity terms and should be judged and managed on that basis. If Government is happy to use climate change arguments to justify allocation of resources, then fine.

Equating these areas with rainforest increases their profile and allows the various member organisations that promote them to raise funds. Many native woodland enthusiasts in Scotland are based on the west coast. There are a fair few lichen and moss experts among them. Such people find and document things. A lot of the species they document are rare at an international level and very often you hear that Scotland holds such and such an impressive proportion of the global total. Of course, species typical of the western coast of Scotland will be largely found on the west coast of Scotland because conditions are different in other parts of the world and they too will have their own distinctive plant communities evolving over time that we will not find here.

If you are interested in these woods, or have them on your property, I wouldn't get caught up too much on the label, or the exact species make-up in different areas. When looking at levels of mosses/lichens/ferns/oak/hazel or whatever,



it is a bit like the philosopher stroking his beard. "Is this a beard upon my chin, or just a few hairs?" When does one become the other? All native woods are intimate mixtures of species and woodland types and vary according to soils, topography, history, climate, altitude and a host of other factors. You don't need to put them in a particular box. Accept them for what they are and accept the diversity too.

Threats to Scotland's rainforest

Deer are an important issue, and we will come to that, but there are many other threats as well. Rhododendrons are especially insidious in west coast native woodlands, with the mild, wet climate and fertile soils aiding their rapid spread. In many areas they have got away and the expense of eradication is such that we will probably never resolve some areas, especially where there are inaccessible gorges or cliffs to maintain a seed source of these aggressive weeds.

Non-native conifer species are a significant issue in many west coast native woodlands which have been underplanted in the past. Ash dieback is a more recent threat, and only becoming apparent now. Ash is an important host for many lichen species in particular, so if we lose it in swathes of these woodlands, there will be very important biodiversity implications to that.

Nitrogen pollution is listed as an important threat to lichens in particular. As with all native woodlands with high rainfall and fertile soils, especially if the canopy is open, bracken can come to dominate, and in the west, this tends to be higher and more aggressive than we find elsewhere in Scotland. Inappropriate agricultural operations can be a threat on a local level, and livestock browsing and bark stripping of more susceptible species can often be common.

Deer

Deer are important, not least because many of the tree species in these woodlands are more susceptible to browsing than the birch or pine we have elsewhere. Pine and birch woodlands are much easier to regenerate in comparison. Oak is especially difficult to regenerate in many woodlands in Scotland, not just because of grazing, but often because of canopy structure as well as it not being able to regenerate under its own canopy. Oak woodlands also spread naturally very slowly through the landscape as acorns must be carried. They cannot blow on the wind. There is often an impatience associated with these woods.



If you are wanting an oak wood on adjacent ground, and want to do it by natural regeneration, then almost certainly, you are going to have a birch wood for several hundred years first before the oak can get naturally established.

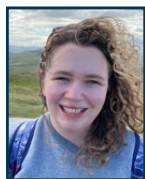
There is a practical issue here that is a challenge for everyone. If you look at the Deer Management Groups (DMGs) in Scotland which have greater levels of native woodlands at higher browsing impacts, the majority of the woodland types involved are of this "rain forest" type. There are a number of issues that compound each other. The tree species are the most vulnerable. If the ground vegetation is grassy or dominated by a layer of moss, then regeneration is difficult, regardless of browsing pressure. If the woods are on fertile ground, this will attract deer. If they are sheltered, then they become proportionately more important in winter for deer welfare, especially if the hinterland is high, nutrient poor and wet. If the woods are close to a loch or to the coast, fencing is difficult and expensive. I am aware of a lot of DMG areas which have this woodland type concentrated around the periphery of their area, next to water, next to roads, and always proportionately more attractive to deer than the higher areas within the Group. In practical terms, even with good intention, those are difficult situations to address and we should have an honest discussion about that.

In conclusion

These woods are important, and they do contain higher levels of distinctive biodiversity than do many of our other woodland types which are more simplistic in many ways. Don't be taken in too much by the "rainforest" label. If that allows others to attract funding to protect them, then that is fine as some of it may work its way through to you and help put management in place. These woods have a wide range of threats, many of which are more insidious than deer, but deer are important as well and, on a practical level, some of the issues are not easy. If we can however think on a practical level, and identify the problems, then we can make progress. We cannot regenerate an area the size of Wales every year in Scotland, but we can expand and improve the resource that we have got.

Victor Clements is a native woodland advisor working in Highland Perthshire. He is Secretary to the Breadalbane DMG and has worked extensively on deer management plans throughout Scotland over the past ten years, and on native woodland schemes for long before that.

Public perceptions of deer management in Scotland



Abi Whitfield,
University of St Andrews

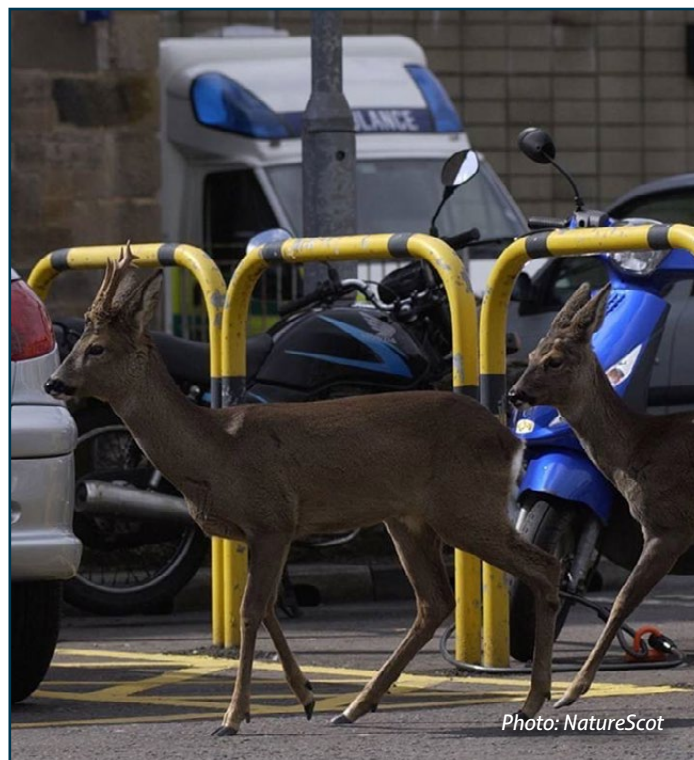
Although deer management is regarded as an 'unavoidable necessity' in many areas of Scotland, there are many differences in opinion regarding deer management practices. Public perceptions can have a significant effect on the success of management actions. Knowing and understanding public perceptions has the potential to improve deer management's effectiveness.

Despite the intense controversies surrounding the topic, public perceptions of deer management have been under-researched in Scotland, with very few previous studies on the subject. This study aimed to fill this gap in the literature, by examining public perceptions, and how these varied by knowledge of deer, urban-rural location and various demographic features. The fieldwork for this study took place in May 2019, with door-to-door surveying undertaken in Stirling, Callander and Killin. 184 completed surveys were received.

In total, 62% of respondents agreed with the use of culling to reduce deer populations and impacts, with only 10% disagreeing. This was much higher than found in previous studies in Scotland, which may demonstrate increased support for culling.

When asked to rank preferences for five different management methods, culling was the second most popular method, with 24% of respondents selecting it as their first preference method. Fencing was the most preferred deer management method, with 67% of respondents supporting its use. Doing nothing to manage deer was the least popular management method, with 64% of respondents selecting it as their least preferred method. Although culling to reduce populations and impacts was well supported, stalking for sport received less support. 53% of respondents disagreed with sport stalking, whilst only 33% agreed with its use. Comments were left highlighting contrasting views on the topic, with some highlighting sport stalking as an "excellent control of populations, bringing money into Scotland", and others declaring sporting estates "partly responsible for excessive deer numbers and habitat damage". Although deer stalking has not received as much media attention in recent years as other forms of hunting in the UK, it remains a contentious subject.

Rural or urban location had a limited effect on perceptions of deer management. This was surprising, as rural-urban divisions are often used to describe public perceptions on environmental topics. This lack of difference may be because of increased mixing of populations, increased ease of communication with the rise of media and the internet, and the differentiation of views within these populations. This could show that geographical location is becoming less important in shaping perceptions, contrasting with traditional assumptions.



Gender was the most influential demographic attribute shaping perceptions. Females were less supportive of lethal management, including sport stalking – a trend that has also been found in studies in North America.

Employment in land-based sectors increased support for culling and stalking, with this perhaps being due to increased awareness of deer impacts. Self-reported knowledge of deer was also an influential factor on perceptions, with higher knowledge increasing support for culling and sport stalking. There is a clear link between knowledge of deer, their impacts and support for management practices. Increased education about deer and their impacts may lead to improved understanding of the need for deer management amongst the public. Educational initiatives, and public consultation, have helped increase support for deer management in some areas of North America.

Overall, this study has helped to improve understanding of public perceptions of deer management in Scotland and how these are shaped, which could help inform future policies in the hope of reducing future conflicts. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to get in touch.

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The full study is published in the
Scottish Geographical Journal:

Public perceptions of deer management
in Scotland: the impact of place of residence,
knowledge and demographic factors

Abigail C E Whitefield, Rob McMorran,
James S Patterson, Charles R Warren

The switch to non-lead ammunition

– a practitioner's perspective



David Allison, Head Stalker,
Reay Forest Estate

During the last few decades, the industry has seen significant changes in technology for our stalking kit, for example from the use of a bipod instead of a rolled-up rifle-case. Optics have changed almost beyond recognition; range finders are built into binoculars.

Clothing has also moved with the times eg Gore-Tex and other waterproof membranes and the addition of base layer fabrics. We can nearly all agree that these changes have made the work in the deer range more enjoyable. These are all progressive steps that we voluntarily invest in or fall for.

Non-toxic ammunition

A further progressive step it seems is the move away from using our long tested and much-loved pet load or factory round with a lead core bullet. So, is the fear of moving to a non-toxic load worse than the reality?

During the hind season of 2019/20, as part of Grosvenor's Reay Forest Estate's drive to promote sustainable practices around game shooting, we tested a few of the non-toxic options for .270 Win. We used both 110 grn and 130 grn Barnes bullets, with differing degrees of accuracy. We saw no notable accuracy issues with the 110grn copper alloy bullets in our .270 rifles. When shot off a bench at 100m, at the Highland Shooting Centre indoor range, all the rounds shot a 1 inch or smaller group.

The heavier bullet 130 grn was very consistent in my own rifle and a couple of the team's rifles, but most of them preferred the 110 grn bullet. Accuracy is not an issue.

I am not recommending one bullet verses the other, so don't be swayed by our experience. Your rifle and own experience will let you know what is right for you.

Stopping power is a concern; some scepticism exists in our sector on this subject. These are genuine concerns, as welfare and ethical practices are at the core of our desire to do the job to the highest possible professional standard.

During season 2020/21 the team culled over 700 red deer as part of our sustainable deer management plan to limit overgrazing and their impact on woodland and biodiversity, primarily using copper alloy ammunition. The team and I have all noted that shot placement is more critical when using the copper alloy projectiles, particularly for the stags, as they take a bit more stopping due to their body mass. We concluded that keeping bullet placement tight into the middle of the shoulder was most consistently effective.



Photo: David Allison

Another critical factor is ricochet, which must be considered as an increased risk. Copper alloy projectiles retain 90% of their mass. In simple terms, there is an increased risk of ricochet because the copper alloy projectiles do not break up like lead core traditional projectiles.

The acid test will be with our guests. Our plan is to allow plenty of time and good coaching by the stalkers - this should limit the risk of poor bullet placement and ensure a safe backstop. In addition, when taking a guest to the target, particular attention must be given to a suitable soft backstop. Our experience has shown that, when using copper alloy bullets, do not shoot at a fixed steel target within 200 metres.

The game dealer has not expressed any issues with additional damage to the deer carcasses from us. However, the Reay Forest team undertook most of the cull during 20/21 season.

So, is the fear worse than the reality? Only time will tell.

What do others say?

"There are some advantages to be had with such a transition. First, it ensures that there is a market for venison and continued job security for those involved. Secondly, we could prove to our opponents that shooters prioritise public health and the environment, which may strengthen our conservation agenda. The downsides to switching are cost and availability. Availability seems the most limiting factor at the moment in the UK. Just pop into your local gun shop and see how little selection they have when it comes to copper ammunition."

"While I am of the belief that switching should be a choice, and nothing will be gained by forcing people to change, the direction of travel from science, consumers and legislation is clearly that we should move away from lead soon."

Dr Al Gabriel, Gun Trade News



Highland Nature biodiversity action plan launched

Photo: Dick Playfair

Highland Nature, the biodiversity action plan for 2021 to 2026 launched in June 2021 shows the commitment to positive work for nature all across the region.

Creating the plan has been coordinated by the Highland Environment Forum and funded by NatureScot and The Highland Council, but the actions for nature will be carried out by the 43 partners who represent land managers, local conservation groups, nature conservation membership organisations and government agencies.

The priorities in Highland Nature take their lead from international and national strategies and focus on what can be contributed at a regional level.

Caroline Vawdrey of the Highland Environment Forum said:

"2021 is a year of international significance for making agreements to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, with the UN Biodiversity Conference being held in China in October, and the UN Climate Conference in Glasgow in November.

"Working to protect and benefit nature is a vital undertaking at all levels – from international agreements to individual land managers. We are indebted to members of the Highland Environment Forum for helping to identify priorities for the Highlands. It is remarkable that forty-three partners have come together to share their ambitions for Highland biodiversity. We also know that this is just some of the work being undertaken in the region, and that there are many other people undertaking positive actions for nature. We'd love them to be involved."

Welcoming the new biodiversity action plan Chair of the Highland Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee and the Council's Climate Change Working Group, Cllr Trish Robertson said:

"Highland Nature is a highly ambitious plan and Highland Council are looking forward to playing its part to protect nature and secure improvements for biodiversity. We will be developing existing partnerships and building new relationships across the Highlands to realise the actions and commitments of Highland Nature and help deliver positive outcomes to mitigate the current ecological emergency."

The actions range from landscape-scale work, such as peatland restoration and woodland expansion to the smaller-scale activity so vital for individual species, like the work by the Caithness Biodiversity Group, growing and planting out kidney vetch to feed the rare small blue butterfly and help it to thrive.

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Highland Nature, 2021 - 2026 can be seen on the Highland Environment Forum website www.highlandenvironmentforum.info where there are also contact details to find out how to get involved.

Alistair Gibson represents ADMG in this initiative.

The Country Food Trust



Tim Woodward, Founding CEO,
The Country Food Trust

If, like me, you have been fortunate to spend most of the last year at home in the countryside you will have noticed many obvious changes from less traffic both on the roads and in the sky to longer periods of quietness.

You may also have noticed something less obvious to many, the increase in the number of deer sightings and incidences of deer damage. Demand for venison collapsed with the closure of our hospitality industry together with the change in exports caused by Brexit, with game dealers taking a reported 60% less deer than usual over the last year. Perhaps this was more evident in England where management of deer is less well organised than in Scotland given the density of the human population. However, this dramatic change opened a door for The Country Food Trust (CFT), the charity that I run and which feeds people in need using game meat.

The Country Food Trust has donated over 2.1 million game-based meals to those in food poverty in the UK in the last five years. We had used predominately gamebird meat in our meals, but over the last year we have become one of the largest buyers of venison. Much of this has been bought from the dealers in Scotland and we have now donated over 425,000 venison-based meals to charity and 172,000 of those meals have gone to charities in Scottish cities.

In using venison, we have been drawn to game dealers such as Highland Game who specialise in deer and we have been keen to distribute as much Scottish venison to Scottish charities as possible. Keeping distribution as local as possible makes good environmental sense which is important to our charity. A side effect of our growing use of venison is that it can start to reduce the significant effect of deer on young tree plantings. As COP 26 in Glasgow approaches, our lack of progress in planting our UK wide target of 30,000 hectares per year to counter climate change must surely be a discussion topic?

Scotland is becoming increasingly important to The Country Food Trust and as well as registering as a charity in Scotland we are also attending the GWCT Scottish Game Fair this year. We are assisted in this endeavour by ADMG and the Scottish Venison Association as we seek to understand how we can have the strongest impact. By chance, our chef Tim Maddams recently moved to the wilds of Morayshire from the increasing less wild county of Devon and, with his help and our Ambassador Charlie Brownlow, we will be putting together a group to represent our charity throughout Scotland and increase the amount of food we can give to charities. If you are interested in helping us then please contact us via our website or through ADMG.

Whilst we are incredibly proud to have delivered 2.1 million meals, with a staggering 8.4 million people in the UK in food poverty it is simple to see that we have really only fed 25% of that number just one meal. People of course need food every day and with Covid increasing the numbers of people in poverty, we have a mountain to climb. But if we can source and process more deer we could start to climb that mountain. Top chef and deer manager Mike Robinson and I recently presented to a group of parliamentarians at Westminster and we left them with this thought:

"If there are 4 million deer in the UK and we need to manage it down to 3 million then then we could create 200 million meals for those in need."

Suddenly the mountain looks a little less high and those planting the 30,000 hectares of young trees we have promised to plant each year may have more of a chance of long-term success. Manage our deer, feed our people, protect our planet?

**Tim Woodward is the founding CEO of
The Country Food Trust.**

More information about CFT at
www.thecountryfoodtrust.org



Country Food Trust Venison Bolognese.
Photo: James Murphy Photography

News from the venison sector



Dick Playfair, Secretary,
Scottish Venison Association

Last year was an exceptionally tough and challenging year for Scottish Venison as indeed it has been not just for food

businesses but across all industry.

We knew from March/April 2020 that Covid was going to impact on the venison market. We didn't know how much or for how long, but we gathered our thoughts early and had a bid in to Scottish Government by the summer, an agency briefed and a campaign costed for launch later in the year.

Covid hit the sector at a time when, for the first time, we had undertaken market and attitudinal research for venison – not just in Scotland but across the UK – funded by the Scottish Government. Undertaken by Kantar this showed that retail sales of venison were increasing in volume by around 20% per annum and by 12% in value. Subsequent data from Kantar has shown that that increase continues despite Covid. The fact we had this data and knew from work done by 56 Degree Insight where the main markets for venison were, made our pitch to Government for help much easier.

We didn't know how Covid would impact on the cull, but we did know that storage at processors was running low with stock carried forward from the previous year. We discussed and saw promotion as vital. An alternative might have been subsidy for cold storage but this would have deferred the problem.

The main constraint through Covid has been the closure of the hotel, restaurant, catering, events and food service sectors. These account for 50% plus and far more in some cases of all processor business. Supply to multiple retail is in the hands of a few. Catering and food service, whilst stuttering back to life, will take a year or more (with Covid under control and in retreat) before they return to where they were in 2019. The choke in the supply chain continues.

The price paid to producers fell, as we know, to £1/kg. This is understandable – everyone was, and still is, trying to survive, although we will see some improvement this coming season, and hopefully a premium for SQWV assured.

Producers have adapted. The last year has seen the opening up and expansion of other routes to market. Initiatives including local processing, estate shops, mail order and click and collect. SVA ran a campaign with Scottish Craft Butchers in the autumn to encourage increased supply through local butchers. Improving local supply chains remains high on our agenda and is an action in the Scottish Venison Strategy.



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SCOTTISH VENISON UPDATE

Exports have been challenged. Having departed Europe on 1 January it has not been an easy process since - costly, mired in red tape and bureaucracy – to send carcasses into Europe even though demand from those markets remains.

SVA has been working hard on behalf of the sector and has been attempting to find ways to iron out or circumvent the many obstacles that have been put in the way – there have been numerous meetings with Government, NatureScot, FSS, members of SVA, SQWV and not least SAOS whose support through this difficult time has been invaluable.

SVA, representing all Scottish Venison, wild and farmed, only has around £20k available to spend yearly. Our income is less than that and reducing excluding what additional income we can generate for projects, and we have used up our modest reserves. Funding comes from the 2p/kg levy that reaches SVA if producers sell their venison to Ardgay Game or Highland Game who collect it on the Association's behalf. Where producers supply other game dealers/processors SVA receives nothing. Last year we also received contributions from the deer farming sector and from Highland Game.

Online promotional campaign

The promotional campaign, costing £60k paid for by Government through the Scotland Food & Drink sector recovery fund, supplemented by an additional £7k of media, ran through March to mid-May. It consisted of three short films in-read, online and supporting activity. In total there were 761,000 impressions of the three ads and a total 238,740 complete views, a result of 28% against 20% forecast so a success on that score. The click thru rate to the website was low at .25% but we expected that as it didn't lead to a product or an offer.

Catering/restaurant sales/orders were not influenced by the campaign due to lockdown continuing but retail and online sales will have benefited. Also, promotional activity and discounting by Highland Game and other processors has supported retail penetration.

Local supply chain

SVA produced three short films with Scottish Craft Butchers and NatureScot last summer and launched these in September to promote the short supply chain from stalker to butcher. Earlier this year we also set up a short-term working group to develop ideas around local chills and processing. That group reported in March and has just gone through the process of gathering information to set up a pilot project (or projects) if we are successful in accessing the necessary funds to do this.

Greenhouse gas emissions

We are embarking on research to assess the level of GHG emissions from the venison sector, all aspects from hill to plate, and to establish the GHG emissions of our wild deer. A scoping document funded by NatureScot through SVA was commissioned from the James Hutton Institute and has been delivered. The next step will be to set up a small working group, source funding for the work, and then put the research project out to tender.

Country Food Trust

We are in discussion with the Country Food Trust. CFT is expanding its operations in Scotland and looking to supply more venison-based meals through third sector supply chains in the future having already procured product through Highland Game.

We want to develop a workable process to which producers can contribute (either in venison or funds) and from which CFT can gain benefit in sourcing venison from Scottish processors. CFT and SVA will join ADMG on its stand at the Scottish Game Fair at Scone in September. More information about CFT and its objectives can be found in an article by Tim Woodward, CEO of CFT, in this Scope.

In conclusion, we all know that the pressure is full on to manage the deer, deliver the cull, and for venison, to go to market through 2021/22. It's a relatively simple supply chain to get healthy food to market but remains significantly challenged.

What happens if that chain breaks? The pandemic has highlighted its fragility. The last thing any of us want is to be wasting this resource.

Storage, we are advised, is close to capacity. Processors can choose who they service and pay accordingly. Lead-free has entered the equation fast. If it is what the market (not just Europe) dictates and if producers want their venison to get to market, they will very likely have to switch.

Covid has highlighted the vulnerabilities of the system. Even though we were much better prepared and equipped than colleagues south of the border we are far from out of the woods. We need to get through this crisis and be better for it – and, with the right resources and support, we maybe can do just that.



Bill Bewsher retires from chair of SVA

Bill Bewsher, who has been SVA Chairman for six and a half years decided that, now in his 90s and not getting any younger, he would step down at the Association's 2020/21 AGM in July. The whole sector owes Bill a huge thank you for all his work, leadership and wise counsel, particularly through the challenges that Covid has thrown at us though the last 18 months. His successor will be announced soon.

Sustainable food, ethical hunting, sporting or not?



Dick Playfair, Secretary,
Scottish Venison Association

I've thought about this a lot in the last few months. Every time the SVA is trying to access more money from Government

or elsewhere, every conversation with a journalist or politician, and discussions across the dinner table.

The arguments for sustainable, collaborative deer management are really strong, not just when approached from the point of lessening environmental impacts or rising to the climate change challenge, but also in putting natural healthy protein into the food chain.

There seems to have been a lot written about the benefits of venison and its environmental credentials in the last year or so.

Some commentary, even if exaggerated, still rings true: "Eat venison and save the planet" might be a little over the top, but certainly venison consumption has a part to play if we don't want this product to go to waste – and it would be criminal if it did.

Byron Pace, a respected writer and film maker in our sector, and a familiar name to many said:

"Some progress has been made in associating hunting with the provision of ethically sourced high-protein low-fat meat, and this has been massively positive across the board."

Yes, hunting or stalking can assume a broader mantle of acceptability if healthy food is the result, and play a part in supporting an environment that meets global biodiversity targets. Marginalised (and some would say demonised), the hunter or stalker should be more widely recognised for their positive contribution, which in turn would help to justify another area of contention, stalking as 'sport'.

Will Pocklington, writing in Shooting Times, commented on this specifically, asking: "When do the lines blur between what is sporting, what is enjoyment, what is tradition and what is ethical?"

He went on to look at different hunting traditions in the UK and elsewhere – stalking vs sitting in a high seat, using the most effective means to reduce numbers causing damage or using your wits and fieldcraft to take down the occasional buck.

Henry Mance, who writes for the Financial Times and The Spectator, and with whom I had a long and pleasant exchange on the topic of venison earlier in the year wrote:

"Of course, what critics of field sports really dislike is the idea that someone would take pleasure from killing. And it's even worse that it's a minority pursuit, caught up with ideas of class. But the animals don't care whether they're killed by a delighted toff or a reluctant abattoir worker."

"I am more affronted by chickens and cows being industrially reared, kept indoors and then slaughtered than I am by deer living wild before being killed instantly. Modern livestock farming takes up a third of the world's habitable land. In contrast, field sports can protect the natural world."

"Give me a deer stalk over an abattoir any day. A world without factory farms is possible. A world where humans don't have to control the populations of some other species is not."

Then there was Xanthe Clay writing in The Telegraph in April: "Its modest carbon footprint in just one reason why venison should be on the menu."

And Ameer Kotecha writing in the Spectator: "In eating deer you'll be doing your bit for the countryside and your waistline."

And that's another good point – along with its other merits, venison is the healthiest of all red meats. Not just good for the planet but good for you too.

Most recently it was the Guardian that gave venison a good report card, featuring it in its list of "most sustainable foods". Its article said: "Venison is a great example of nutrient-rich meat produced from the grass and foraged plants and trees that humans cannot utilise. It is also in abundant supply as, with predators no longer at large in the UK, deer populations are routinely culled so they don't outstrip the supply of wild vegetation and encroach on farmland."

The balance is tipping. These arguments in favour of sustainable, responsible collaborative deer management resulting not just in environmental benefit but good healthy food are exceptionally strong. These are positive messages that merit frequent repetition – as well as being possibly among our best lines of defence?



Photo: Dick Playfair

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