

ADMG Regional Meeting, 24 November 2021, Inverness

Tom Turnbull - Chairman's Report

Thank you all for attending our regional meeting today. I am delighted that we are all able to meet again in person for the first time since the outbreak of Covid 19 and, whilst I don't want to dwell for too long on the topic, I do think it is worth reflecting a little.

Covid saw very few sporting clients coming to the Highlands. It also saw a sharp drop in the venison price and continued pressure for us to undertake deer management. I believe that it is very much to the credit of DMGs that, despite these considerable hurdles, deer management continued across the highlands. Culls whilst slightly down during the period were largely maintained despite Covid and our deer management plans and population models have meant that we are able to react to changes in circumstances in a way that we might not have been able to historically. DMGs continued to meet, albeit remotely, and there was a very clear demonstration of deer managers' commitment to undertaking collaborative deer management. Indeed, in the light of the fall in the venison price we saw local sales of venison increase with quite a few estates opting to sell venison directly to local customers and adding value in this way.

ADMG continued to meet regularly and I believe we have had seven online meetings during the Covid outbreak, with the most recent being a Chairs and Secretaries meeting on 26 October which was very well attended. So, whilst there were huge challenges associated with Covid, on the whole DMGs were able to adapt and to stick to the task of sustainable deer management.

Covid has seen an increase in the amount of people taking access to the countryside, and sadly some of it does not always follow the guidance set out by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. We have continued to liaise with NatureScot on this issue who have been able to raise awareness on social media. ADMG was also able to highlight some of the challenges at the September meeting of the National Access Forum. Recent e-scopes have requested information from members on access and their experiences and it is something I would encourage you to bring up today as we go around the room hearing updates from individual member Groups. Whilst there are some negative stories, we would also welcome positive information and any helpful advice on dealing with issues.

It feels like a long time ago that we last met in person and during that time there have been considerable changes. Everything we do now will be framed in light of the climate crisis. Agriculture will slowly be asked to work towards outcomes-based solutions, the capture of carbon has changed the marketplace for what once would only have been considered valuable as a sporting asset. Planting schemes and peatland restoration will continue to drive the investment in land, and we will see a huge shift in the reasons for managing land within our Deer Management Groups.

I know that some of you are concerned about this trend away from traditional sporting or stalking estates. Deer densities in many areas will continue to decline; we can see this as a negative or we can work with the asset that we have. I don't envisage a time where I stop taking sporting clients onto the hill, but deer management will always have to be framed in the light of the climate crisis. Perhaps we will see an increase in the amount that we can charge for a stag or we will have to concentrate a little more on the experience that we provide. After all, for many land managers the necessity to plant trees, manage habitats and consider the impacts of grazing is nothing new. The speed that we see things change will however provide a challenge for collaboration.

There is little doubt that changing land management objectives will see the potential for uncomfortable conversations within DMGs increase. To this end we have embarked on the *Common Ground Project*. Alongside Scottish Land and Estates, Trees for Life, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Plantlife, The Woodland Trust and NatureScot we commissioned mediation experts, the Centre for Good Relations, to interview 40 deer managers from a variety of backgrounds about the conflicting views of deer management and provide an overview of the issues involved. We have since received a proposal to take this forward as a conflict resolution project that would require people from varying backgrounds to spend time looking at ways forward where conflict exists. This work would require the need to apply for joint funding but would hopefully provide a template for deer managers to move forward where differences of opinion exist. This is a hugely important piece of work particularly in light of the changing land use objectives of some of our membership and one that ADMG will be taking a lead on. Most importantly perhaps, this work is a very clear demonstration of the desire for deer managers from all backgrounds to collaborate, an important message at a time when the Scottish Government is considering the future of deer management.

I understand the reticence that some may have about the changes that we are challenged with as an industry, however, for many it will provide opportunities. Whilst habitat improves and woodland increases there is no doubt that collaboration will continue to be vital in managing our shared resource. The implications of changing practices in land management will be very important to consider. I am pleased therefore that ADMG have been working with others to look at a system called *DeerMap* that will help predict deer movements following a change in land management, whether that be the fencing off of a large area, heavy culls in one area of a DMG, increased access or even the removal of livestock from an area. It is hoped that *DeerMap* will provide a map-based programme that will help DMGs to talk through the implications for deer when a sudden change of management in an area takes place. I know and see regularly the value of DMG members sitting around discussing map data, so it is hoped that this will enable DMGs to help predict the possible outcomes of changes in management and adapt appropriately.

Like all industries we need to consider the potential impacts of deer on the environment. It is not unusual now for industries to start to consider their greenhouse gas emissions and deer management and the venison industry should be no different. ADMG has recently joined a steering group that will investigate fully the carbon footprint of deer management. We may not be happy with the results, but it will demonstrate our commitment to better understanding the impacts that deer have on the environment and what we are doing to improve that picture. The investigation will take in all aspects of deer management and we will be working closely with NatureScot, The Scottish Venison Association and game dealers.

It was clear that some of our membership felt that we did not react robustly enough to the culling of hinds and calves in September. We did make comment at the time and this is noted on the FLS website. We stated that all possible efforts should be made to cull deer in season and that all deer management should be done in accordance with Best Practice Guidance, avoiding the orphaning of dependent calves. We understand that this is an emotive subject for some of you, however in the light of the Deer Working Group Report and the recommended continued consideration on hind seasons and the proposed removal of the close season for stags, it is one that is unlikely to go away in a hurry and the ADMG stance is very clear.

The recommendation that the NatureScot Assessment process is ending is one that some will welcome. However, it does pose ADMG with a problem. How do we demonstrate to ourselves and others the progress that we are making and at the same time provide a template to our membership from which they can operate? To this end we have started work on an ADMG assessment that will be available for Groups to undertake voluntarily in order to guide us all through the next few years. It is possible that this assessment could evolve into some form of accreditation in due course should this be seen as desirable to the membership.

Finally, I would like you to consider the ADMG logo. Whilst I am not considering a total re branding or change of direction for ADMG, I would ask you to consider the current image of a dead stag on a pony. It is a vital and important part of our heritage of that there is little question, however, is it the image that we want others to see when first learning about us, and is it truly reflective of our whole membership? This is a topic that I am very happy to admit that I wrestle with. I am proud of our heritage as stalkers and there is no doubting the romantic image of a stag coming off the hill but when we ask members to be careful about images that they put on social media I question whether this logo places us in the best light. Please don't worry there will be a chance for feedback, and we will be contacting you all on E-scope soon for your views.

These new projects are all important to us, but they won't happen without the buy-in and backing of our membership. To this end we do intend to give you the opportunity for feedback wherever possible. I am only too aware of how busy we all are; however, we would appreciate feedback from you on issues such as the logo, views on access and other topics, so please do so when you can and indeed encourage others to do so too.

The next few years will be challenging but it is clear that we are more than capable of responding to a challenge. The importance of collaboration is regularly talked about in consultations and government guidance, and we will be stronger if we all work together. I believe we can be very pleased with the work that we have undertaken so far and that we are in a very good place to continue into what I hope will be an exciting future.