

# ASSOCIATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT GROUPS ANNUAL REVIEW 2021/22



## IN 30 YEARS' TIME COLLABORATIVE DEER MANAGEMENT WILL BE EVEN MORE IMPORTANT

Photo: Neil McIntyre



Tom Turnbull, Chairman  
Association of Deer Management Groups

**It is good to be returning to some semblance of normality. The pandemic has challenged us all with significantly reduced venison values and a whole season with almost no sporting income. It is clear that deer managers in the Highlands responded admirably to the problems that they faced. Culls were not significantly down, and deer management continued despite the obvious problems we all faced, this was not the case in some parts of the country but within the Deer Management Groups area we can be proud of the fact that we carried on in the interests of deer welfare, and achieving the population model targets set out in our deer management plans.**

This year is the 30th anniversary of ADMG and I think it is important to pause briefly and consider the huge amount of work that has been undertaken by our membership during that time. Deer Management Groups (DMGs) have come a long way and have in many ways pioneered collaborative landscape scale land management in Scotland. Whilst originally the membership was largely from a sporting background, it is good to see that DMGs now include deer managers from all land management interests and this strengthens the work that we do.

We have in place a system that works and, particularly over the last ten years, has risen to the challenges that have emerged. We have a falling deer population in the uplands, we undertake habitat impact assessments (HIAs) across huge areas, tree planting has continued at pace and significant peatland restoration is underway. We have deer

management plans that cover almost 3 million hectares of the Highlands. We have been assessed by NatureScot three times and we have shown clear improvements in the way that we operate. I am not aware of another rural industry that has been pressured in the same way and has risen to that challenge so well and, importantly, voluntarily.

As we move out of the pandemic, we must be under no illusion that deer management will now always be framed in the light of the climate crisis. Deer Management Groups will come under continued pressure to reduce deer numbers. Whilst a target density of 10 deer/sq km seems to be an arbitrary figure it does look as though this will be implemented. We already have fewer than 10 deer/sq km on the open range and most DMGs have population models aimed at reducing deer numbers. As we are all aware different habitats can hold differing numbers of deer alongside other herbivores and productivity can vary hugely; what works in the Angus Glens may not work in Argyll. I believe that we should be cautious about being compelled into implementing a one size fits all approach based on what is, when all is taken into account, a meaningless metric.

ADMG would like to consider whether there is a different, more flexible metric that could be used and would be interested in working with NatureScot on this. After all, currently we are basing all our modelling on a five-yearly snapshot of a landscape. Now that we have HIA up and running across large areas I hope that we will be able to consider this further in conjunction with some sensible conversations about all herbivores and not just deer. The disconnect in policy between sheep and deer from Scottish Government continues to be a problem that doesn't currently appear to be taken seriously enough.

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT (CONTINUED)

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Equally I am concerned about the introduction of a proposed cull approval system. This would be a serious step away from the voluntary principle that is so important in holding the DMGs together. My fear is that Groups might be used as the vehicle by which culls will be set by Scottish Government. In reality we are staring down the barrel of statutory deer management and this will, I believe, be detrimental. Progress has been clear and documented both by Ministers and NatureScot in its 2019 review of deer management. I am concerned that we are endangering the system under which so many improvements have been made.

It is understood that NatureScot will be undertaking a cost benefit analysis of a cull approval system. ADMG will argue that as NatureScot already sits in on all DMG meetings and has an input to the population models that we rely on, it would be counterproductive to request compulsory cull targets and, indeed, may prevent people from undertaking collaborative deer management. We have already seen reductions in deer numbers in the Highlands and feel that this trend is likely to continue into the future without the intervention of Government.

I think that it is reasonable to ask the question: "Why are DMGs put under so much pressure?" It is clear that the Highlands are one of the few parts of the UK where deer are managed collaboratively, and also one of the few areas where deer numbers are proven to have fallen. Where possible, we undertake annual foot counts and we have the benefit of excellent helicopter count data, we are very aware of the numbers of deer that we have, and we are working to reduce them further. There is little doubt that we are well placed to tackle the climate crisis and I believe that we will hit the ambitious targets for tree planting and peatland restoration that we are set, but still we come under increasing scrutiny.

We are all in agreement about the benefits of woodland expansion and ADMG will continue to encourage its membership to plant more trees where it is appropriate or to encourage natural regeneration where this is possible. But in doing so we must learn the lessons of the past. In the 1970s and 1980s trees were often planted without considering how deer management might be undertaken in the future. Many of these forests now have very high deer densities and deer management has become difficult and often expensive. Whilst the density of deer on the open range sits at approximately 9.3 deer/sq km we regularly hear of far higher densities in our forests. It would seem that we are at a point that it may be the deer that are coming out of our woodlands that should be the main focus where once it was the deer coming off the hills and into the woodland that were often blamed. If we hit the tree planting targets set by Scottish Government, we should be in no doubt that in years to come we will be dealing with a very productive woodland deer population that will be harder to manage.

Forestry and Land Scotland has years of experience in dealing with deer in woodlands and, as some of you may be aware, they have been working on producing an online dashboard which contains information relating to their deer and other wildlife management operations covering

the last fifteen years. Contained within this dashboard is a wealth of data that helps FLS with their day-to-day deer management and plan for the challenges of managing deer on their landholdings.

As we look to the future, habitat loss and reductions in biodiversity will be tackled through the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy which has overarching aims to prevent loss of habitat by 2030 and to ensure habitat restoration by 2045. It will be the job of the new Strategic Deer Board, recently created by Scottish Government and comprising senior officials from public agencies, to develop work streams aimed at delivering deer management and the recommendations contained within the Deer Working Group Report.

Many of the 92 accepted recommendations from this report will require a change in statute and it had been hoped that this would have been implemented in the form of a new Deer Bill. It now looks far more likely that changes in statute will be contained within an all-encompassing Natural Environment Bill. Whilst the idea of tidying up deer legislation is something that we could all have signed up to under a new Deer Bill, the idea of lumping all new deer legislation under a new Natural Environment Bill will surely cloud the issue rather than consolidate legislation? It is hoped that stakeholder engagement will continue and the vital input of the practitioners on the ground valued. We will continue to press the Scottish Government to give any new deer legislation the very careful consideration and scrutiny that it deserves.

Over the next year ADMG will take a lead and ensure that DMGs are in a position to continue to maintain the high standards that they have demonstrated over the last ten years and, to this end, ADMG will be rolling out our own Health Check to DMGs. This should not be seen as a negative process but as an opportunity to flag up areas that ADMG needs to provide support and guidance for Groups. It will focus largely on those key benchmarking areas that DMGs should concentrate on to ensure that they are operating to the best of their abilities. It is intended that this will be an easy to use process that will maintain the momentum of the past assessments and importantly we hope that DMGs will be able to provide feedback to us.

We have asked the membership about updating the ADMG logo. This has attracted some response, and some have even volunteered their own artistic suggestions. My view is that we should have a simple clear logo and we will be asking an agency to provide a design at a reasonable cost to implement this coming year.

Our work on the Common Ground Project continues and we are close to achieving full funding for the next stage of this process. Occasionally relationships within some DMGs can be characterised by low trust and, with changing priorities for many land managers, we do need to understand better the barriers to successful working relationships. ADMG sits on the steering group for this project alongside Plantlife Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates, Trees for Life and the Woodland Trust. We will also be providing some of the funding for the next stage of the project which will be based



around a civic mediation approach of accountable dialogue through a series of workshops, meetings and a residential gathering where it is hoped that stakeholders can explore some of the issues and barriers to successful collaboration. We will be using the civic mediators the Centre for Good Relations who were engaged in the first phase of the project and which included a series of interviews undertaken last year. So far this has been a rewarding and positive project and I hope that it will continue to encourage dialogue between deer managers with differing objectives.

ADMG has been asked to present at the next meeting of the National Access Forum so please provide us with further information on access experiences both positive and negative. This would be extremely useful.

I have been lucky enough to be invited to a number of DMG meetings over the past year and as well as increased access one of the topics that recurs on a regular basis is concern about wildfire. At our AGM we will be hearing from Alex McKinley from The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service who will be informing us about some of the challenges that they face and how land managers can help and engage in the prevention of wildfire.

ADMG is also heavily involved in a small steering group to address how the wild deer and Scottish venison sectors can reduce greenhouse gas emissions from their activities. We have decided that we should as a first step produce a Statement of Intent outlining where we think the main issues lie and how they can be tackled to be followed up with commissioning more science so that we fully understand the situation and where we want to be, ie net zero, by a specific target date yet to be set.

The Statement of Intent will be produced this spring, and the science will build on and update the 2009 report *A Life Cycle Assessment of Scottish Wild Venison*.

After nearly a year as Chair of ADMG I have been hugely impressed by the work that DMGs continue to undertake voluntarily, at their own cost, in the public interest, and the positives are clear. In some ways we have been the victims of our own success, by collaborating, sharing data and being open and honest about how we undertake deer management we have in effect put a target on our backs whilst others have slipped under the radar. But I believe we can be extremely proud of much of what has taken place over the last thirty years. The improvements are obvious and have been accelerating each year.

Whilst there are many sensible points within the Deer Working Group's recommendations there are some over which we should have very real concerns; statutory cull targets and deer densities will I fear muddy the waters and endanger the rate of change that we have recently seen. We must nurture the benefits of our collaborative structure and the important role that it plays in the welfare of our deer. I believe we can further reduce deer numbers in some areas and maintain sporting culls, but this needs to be done through careful population modelling based on evidence and not through statutory targets that may see some walking away from the voluntary process.

It is clear to me that in another thirty years' time collaborative deer management will be even more important, but we are now at a point where we need to seriously consider how we continue to move forward and represent the best interests of our members.

# DMGS MUST BE REGARDED BY THEIR PARTICIPANTS AS FORUMS IN WHICH TO DEVELOP SOLUTIONS AND NOT FOR SIMPLY AIRING GRIEVANCES



Bob McIntosh

**Many will be aware of the differences of opinion that exist in Scotland with regard to deer management practices.**

The source of most of the tensions is the emergence of a wider diversity of land management objectives, particularly in the uplands. Estates managing red deer with a sporting objective, and which once shared that objective with their neighbours, now find themselves as part of a patchwork quilt of owners with differing land management objectives, including agriculture, commercial forestry, native woodland creation, rewilding, grouse moor management and management for nature conservation. If carried out responsibly, each of these is a legitimate and appropriate land use, but all are expected to operate in accordance with the Code of Practice on Deer Management published by Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot).

The Code sets out a framework for sustainable deer management that takes account of the private and public interest. However, each land manager will, with good reason, have a different perspective on the appropriate deer density associated with their land management objectives and on the extent to which they wish to use the legal opportunities to extend the culling window. The attitude that 'my neighbour has a different approach to me so must be wrong' has constantly held back attempts to achieve harmony across the deer range.

The Deer Management Groups, which cover most of upland Scotland, provide the opportunity for land managers to come together to agree land and deer management plans that aim to accommodate the needs of each party with respect to deer density while hopefully avoiding the prospect of the Scottish uplands being blighted by an over-reliance on deer fencing. However, this can only be successful if relevant parties are able and willing to participate in the DMGs and if the participants regard them as a forum in which to develop solutions, rather than one in which to simply air grievances.

The divide between those who feel that deer should always be managed in accordance with the sport 'ethic' and those who think that control of the population is all that matters continues to be difficult to bridge. The sport 'ethic' (no out of season or night shooting, don't shoot male deer in velvet, concentrate on older animals with trophy potential) is fine in its place but is not always appropriate in circumstances where the landowner is struggling to achieve the control necessary to limit deer impact on woodlands and biodiversity. Issues such as night shooting and out of season shooting can, understandably, generate an emotional response but we need an objective approach which is based on good evidence. There is no welfare issue associated with the culling of woodland male



Photo: Neil McIntyre

deer over the winter period and the use of digital night vision equipment would make night shooting, where it is required, more efficient and more humane as, in contrast to the use of spot-lamps, it does not disturb the animals and enables the stalker to spend more time checking out the background and selecting the best animals to cull. More effective use of the growing number of 'recreational' stalkers would help to reduce, but would not eliminate, the need for such measures and those stalkers will have to accept that their role is to deliver the landowner's management objectives.

It's clear that the Scottish Government's patience is wearing thin and that it is not convinced that the voluntary approach is working quickly enough to deliver sustainable deer management that delivers for biodiversity, rural development and climate change. It is important that those involved in deer management come together to settle their differences and accept compromises that will reduce the scope for conflict and disagreement. If not, it's likely that the Scottish Government will legislate. That would be unfortunate given that such legislation, when exposed to the Scottish Parliament in draft, will be subject to amendment by a political process that, as was demonstrated by the outcome of the mountain hare issue, can result in ill-judged and unhelpful legislation. Even now it may be too late to avoid this happening.

The deer sector in Scotland badly needs voices of reason that can promote the middle way and help to bring the different factions together. ADMG is one, and BDS another that can be forces for good by adopting and promoting an objective and evidence-based approach to deer management, and one that is based on the need to find the sensible middle ground between deer welfare considerations, for example, and the practicalities of management as well as the need to find the appropriate balance between public and private interests.

*Dr Bob McIntosh is Tenant Farming Commissioner, a Board member of Highlands & Islands Enterprise and a member of the ADMG Executive Committee*