

## Chairman's update

### ADMG Meeting 20 September 2022

Thank you all for attending the meeting today. I would first of all like to pass on our condolences to The Royal Family at the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. What has been very clear over the past ten days is the vital part that Scotland and the Highlands played in the life of our late Queen. I would also like to acknowledge the important role that our new King Charles has played in the creation of the Association of Deer Management Groups, very early on encouraging East Grampian Deer Management Group to take a lead across the country, speaking at the first ADMG conference, and commissioning a consultant study on the Venison Market. The Royal Family has had a vital part in Highland life and I would like thank them on behalf of ADMG.

We are at an important stage in the future of deer management in Scotland we face the introduction of the 92 accepted recommendations of the Deer Working Group Report, these will be introduced over a period of time many of which look likely to be tied up in a Natural Environment Bill. We are in little doubt that the message from Scottish Government is that the priority is the climate crisis and the improvement of biodiversity. We are under increasing pressure to reduce deer numbers, particularly in those areas where densities are higher than 10 deer/sq km. NatureScot is more than aware of those DMGs above this figure and I would encourage members to consider carefully not only those densities at the higher end but also the all-important data collected under Habitat Impact Assessments. For those Groups that face reductions in numbers it will be important to consider population models carefully.

All this means a challenging future for collaboration. Land management objectives will be more varied and members of DMGs will occasionally come into conflict with one another on deer management targets. To this end, the work that we are undertaking on the *Finding the Common Ground* project is invaluable.

We recently had a two-day workshop at the University of Stirling with 40 deer and land managers from a variety of backgrounds attending. The series of sessions over the two days provided an opportunity for people to vocalise the challenges that they face in collaboration, and some heartfelt truths were expressed. This project will continue over the next year and I think some important steps have already been taken in the right direction.

It became very clear to me over the two days in Stirling that the way that people are treated in some DMG meetings can on occasion be intimidating and disrespectful. We must all remember that DMG meetings are attended voluntarily by those that have an interest in managing deer collaboratively. Conduct at meetings must therefore be respectful and calm. Understandably, feelings can run high and the discussions may be emotive, but no one should come away from a meeting feeling intimidated or that they can no longer attend. This places a lot of importance on the office bearers of DMGs to maintain a sensible constructive conversation at all times providing those present the opportunity to air their opinions in a calm way.

I would encourage all DMG chairs to bring to my attention any situations in which we might improve discourse and likewise if anyone attends a DMG meeting and they feel that they were not treated appropriately that this is brought to my attention as a matter of urgency and ADMG will then endeavour to engage with this problem. There is no place within DMGs for aggressive or dismissive language that is simply counterproductive to collaborative deer management.

Over the course of the last few months we have had the opportunity to meet twice with Lorna Slater, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity including a day at Glenfalloch Estate as part of the *Finding the Common Ground* project, and ADMG also had the chance of a meeting albeit on Zoom with the minister to discuss deer management directly. We were able to convey our concerns for the future of deer management and discuss the importance of collaboration. I also recently spent some time with Scotland's Moorland Forum at Auchnafree Estate, Perthshire at which Mairi McAllan Minister for Environment and Land Reform was present to talk about many aspects of moorland management. ADMG will continue to liaise with the Scottish Government and will as ever maintain our close links with NatureScot and FLS.

ADMG has also written to The Strategic Deer Board requesting to make a further contribution as the representative of a great many stakeholders. Our paper outlined the positive work that is taking place across the Highlands and the role that DMGs will play into the future. ADMG members are uniquely positioned to meet ambitious government targets - indeed they have already risen to a great many challenges. A top-down approach to deer management that doesn't consider those that will ultimately deliver the targets, is unlikely to work. We hope to be engaged to a greater extent going forward.

ADMG has made a recent response to *Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy* consultation which is available online. This important consultation has now closed and sets out the new targets for nature in Scotland, aiming to halt biodiversity loss in Scotland by 2030 and regenerate biodiversity across Scotland by 2045. Whilst it is hard to argue with these important targets, we do have concerns over the simplicity of this consultation which fails to recognise the tapestry of land management use across the Highlands and the considerable work that has already been undertaken by many land managers in improving biodiversity.

The section of the consultation that concentrates on the future of the uplands has several references to deer and ADMG has challenged the language used, there is a failure to recognise the work undertaken by deer managers to date in the Highlands and the document refers to 'ever increasing deer numbers.' This has been frustrating, particularly when Scottish Government should be very well aware that deer numbers are static or decreasing across much of the Highlands and this has been acknowledged by NatureScot over several years.

In our response we made it very clear that the continued failure to recognise the good work of DMGs is both demotivating and alienating to the very people who will largely be required to hit these biodiversity targets.

The consultation fails to recognise impacts of other herbivores in the uplands also and we have highlighted the lack of reference to sheep and the frustratingly divergent Scottish Government policies on sheep and deer. ADMG was also keen to point out the barriers of the past that have prevented entrants to many environmental schemes. Inflexibility, challenging budget timelines, single year application and a lack of consultation between Scottish Government agencies have often led to slow progress. Application fatigue has in the past prevented many opportunities for improvements.

We were keen to point out that much biodiversity loss historically can be laid at the feet of government policy. However, it is always the land managers who carry the can. Minimum stocking densities for sheep, peatlands drained in line with agricultural production, and commercial forestry plantations that now hold high densities of deer, were all encouraged by government incentivisation, yet it is the land managers that now face the consequences for implementing historic schemes.

Alongside *Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy* consultation, we are also finalising our response to the *Land Reform in a Net Zero Nation* consultation. In many ways this is a more difficult response for ADMG and balancing the views of all our membership is not easy.

We do however have concerns that the consultation fails to provide any evidence that large scale land ownership has any negative impacts, indeed as we are all very aware landscape scale land management is often made easier through larger landholdings and therefore the ability to reach net zero may be detracted through fractured ownership. We believe that large scale landholdings should not be seen as a negative but as an opportunity to deliver the sort of change desired in the biodiversity strategy. It would appear that the Land Reform and Biodiversity consultations may be pulling in differing directions.

The consultation proposes that landholdings are categorised as large scale if they are over 3,000 ha and as such may be subject to a variety of added measures including the introduction of a legal duty for landowners to comply with the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, a voluntary statement that aims to provide a fairer society through a more diverse pattern of land ownership, a greater ability for communities to own land, more transparency of ownership with improved collaboration and community involvement. We feel that a voluntary LRRS would still enable much positive work to take place but a legal duty to do so would only add another layer of bureaucracy that would likely inhibit positive change. The land rights and responsibilities statement is also currently under review. This review should we believe be concluded prior to any ability to comment on it.

Also, in the consultation it is proposed that all 'large scale' landowners will have to publish Land Management Plans. Again, this would in effect duplicate our already published Deer Management Plans and place another layer of administration onto land managers already under pressure to deliver net zero targets.

As I have mentioned in the past we are at a time of considerable change in the management of our uplands. Woodland creation and peatland restoration are increasingly common and will change the way we consider deer management in the future; land management objectives are in many cases moving away from the traditional sporting estates and towards environmental management or indeed as is more often the case a hybrid of the two. To this end I have asked Colin McLean of the Cairngorms National Park to talk to us about deer and peatlands. I have also asked Winston Churchill a deer manager who many of you will know, to talk about woodland and forestry creation and the associated challenges for deer management. I very much look forward to hearing from them both later in the meeting and there will be an opportunity for you to ask them questions

This is perhaps a greater period of flux than we have seen for years in the Highlands. Pressure to combat the climate crisis will put deer managers at the forefront of this change. We have Deer Management Plans in place, numbers are dropping on the open hill and deer are being managed with the public interest to the fore. In many of the consultation meetings that I have been involved with I hear of the need to collaborate, to manage our land on a landscape scale and to work in the public interest, as you are all well aware Deer Management Groups have been doing this for many years and I believe deserve greater recognition for this fact. ADMG will continue to point out to Scottish Government that to demotivate the very people charged with responding to the climate crisis would be an error.

We should be proud of the fact that we are working positively to manage deer collaboratively. I am not aware of another part of Scotland or the UK where this is happening on the scale that it is in the Highlands. In many places outside the DMG area deer numbers are increasing, cull returns are unknown, and collaboration is patchy.

Whilst we are in a period of change, I believe that DMGs can continue to demonstrate that we are fit for purpose and able to continue to deliver.