

ADMG Regional Meeting update – 6 December 2022

Report from Tom Turnbull, ADMG Chairman

Following the end of the 2022 stag season and the start of the hind season we find ourselves at a critical junction for deer management in the Highlands. The Strategic Deer Board is considering the four workstreams, regulation, legislation, incentives and operational delivery strategies for deer management.

ADMG met with the Strategic Deer Board at Blackmount Estate at the end of October. Prior to the meeting we provided the Board with a paper, highlighting the important work that our members undertake and the considerable improvements that have been made by DMGs over the past 10 years. We also highlighted those areas that we believe need support, particularly in the light of the four workstreams that they are considering. We have also met with MSPs and in particular Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, with whom we have now met three times to discuss deer management as this sits within her portfolio.

We are encouraged that The Strategic Deer Board appears to be seriously considering incentives for deer management but as yet we are unaware of the form that these might take. We do believe that the additional resources required to reduce deer numbers in line with NatureScot ambitions and the potential loss of sporting income should seriously be considered if the Scottish Government is to achieve its ambitious targets. If targets for reduced deer numbers are met the challenge for Scottish Government will be in continuing to maintain the workforce required to manage deer. We do have real concerns about employment in the medium term and the effects that this will have on remote rural communities - something that ADMG has raised with The Strategic Deer Board and Ministers.

If direct incentives are considered for deer management these cannot be short term, they will need to sustain deer related employment in remote rural communities. I have stated many times that habitat improvements will in the long term see increases in deer numbers and the requirement for highly skilled, experienced and motivated deer managers will be greater than ever. These skills need to be nurtured.

The operational delivery of deer management in line with a changing landscape that includes greater woodland cover and habitat restoration will be very important. Planning must be made now for how we manage deer in forty years' time when trees have grown, access is more difficult and opportunities to shoot deer are reduced. We should also be considering carefully the implications of improved habitat and the fuel load for wild fires.

Increased culls should not be seen as an alternative to other deer management options, fencing must continue to be an important tool to land managers. Without fencing Scottish Government targets for woodland will not be achieved, particularly in areas where a seed source is not present, and fencing will often be the only option to establish trees.

Deer management in most circumstances is currently carried out at a cost to the landowner, the increasing requirements on DMGs through the assessment process and Deer Management Planning has meant that expenses have gone up. We would like Scottish Government to acknowledge the importance of collaboration and provide added incentives for landscape scale deer management.

Incentivising deer management directly would be helpful but without transforming the currently unwieldy and inflexible grant system for environmental improvements many opportunities will be missed again. ADMG was able to make this point directly to the Strategic Deer Board using the experiences of ADMG members, including the imbalance in priorities for sheep and deer and the negative impacts of repeatedly applying for schemes that are expensive, complicated and restrictive. Application fatigue has set in for many land managers.

It is clear that NatureScot will be encouraged to use its regulatory powers to help enact the Deer Working Group recommendations. ADMG has never discouraged NatureScot from using regulation where it is justified and appropriately applied and we believe the full suite of powers are already available should they be required.

ADMG has strongly stated that it is vital to avoid a situation in which deer managers are compelled to manage deer by Scottish Government. Statutory cull targets will be entirely detrimental to successful collaborative deer management and we want to avoid people walking away from a collaborative structure that has already achieved so much.

Many of the Deer Working Group recommendations were directly linked to deer legislation and rightly sought to tidy up anomalies and improve on what currently exists. A new Natural Environment Bill will not be the best place to do this and we continue to urge Scottish Government to create a new Deer Bill rather than clouding deer management with other unrelated environmental matters.

We are well aware of the 10 deer per sq km target from the Deer Working Group report and I have been made aware that it has been suggested that ADMG is supportive of this target. To be clear, this is not an ADMG target, we questioned the validity of this figure at the time of publication in early 2020 and our views have not changed since, the original ADMG response was as follows:

'ADMG finds this conclusion most surprising being at odds with the general thrust of the DWG recommendations that environmental impacts, not deer numbers or densities, should be the yardstick for "effective deer management". It also appears to overlook that the SNH Report finds that the current population of red deer averages 9.3 per sq. km'

Densities are a relatively crude tool albeit the only one we have, a snapshot that we can use to monitor numbers. But we have always had concerns over a blanket density being applied to the Highlands. Deer movements, sporting targets, weather conditions, and habitat response should all also be taken into consideration when setting cull targets. The majority of DMGs are already below the 10 deer per sq km figure and those that are above are tackling this proactively. Indeed, it is likely that many more DMGs will drop below 10 deer per sq km over the next few years without NatureScot intervention purely through the voluntary work of their members.

I would like to reiterate that 10 deer per sq km is not an ADMG target but one that is being pushed by Scottish Government. It is frustrating to us that having put such emphasis on Herbivore Impact Assessments often at cost to the land manager the messaging has been reduced down to, 'we just want less deer' from NatureScot. An over simplification that is unlikely to see the required habitat improvements and one that ignores the nuances of deer management.

It is extremely disappointing that there is almost no mention of lowland deer in Scotland's Biodiversity consultation despite the fact that deer numbers are unknown in the lowlands, cull returns are patchy at best and deer numbers are increasing. Meanwhile the same consultation pins the hopes of biodiversity improvement on deer reduction for the uplands with no mention of other herbivores at all.

It has been brought to my attention that one or two DMGs have been told at meetings that NatureScot will not be providing ongoing support to some Deer Management Groups. I have received confirmation that this is not strictly the case, however, those groups that are deemed to be operating well may not receive the same levels of support as they have in the past, with those groups with higher densities and impacts coming under greater scrutiny. Groups have often relied heavily on the help of their WMOs and I believe that this will be a negative step from NatureScot that should be avoided if at all possible.

The end of the stag season saw reports of the venison sector under increased strain. Dick Playfair will I am sure be expanding on this in his report, but I would like to consider some of the reasons and the implications of a venison sector under strain. The vast majority of stags are being shot at the end of September and up until 20 October. This means that we have larders full of deer, many of which are run and not in prime condition for the market with export becoming more and more difficult. Game dealers struggle to keep up with demand and we must consider how this can be avoided in the future. There is little doubt that we should try to shoot more early stags to release pressure on the market, but this is complicated by sporting guests understandably wanting to shoot deer out of velvet and during the rut.

ADMG has been liaising regularly with NatureScot and The Scottish Venison Association to consider the implications of more venison coming into the market over the next few years. If we are to increase culls, the capacity to process and sell the venison needs to be in place. Every year during the stags the market is put under pressure and to a lesser extent towards the end of the hinds. Increasing numbers of deer being shot throughout the UK means that we will need to widen the market. In short, we need more venison being eaten. I believe we are getting to the point where we the producers will need to provide more funding for increased venison marketing. Scottish Government have supplied £160,000 to support the venison sector since the start of Covid. The Scottish Venison Association runs on very small budget (£17,000 in 2021/22) and we will need to increase this if we are to push Scottish venison to a wider audience.

We have concluded the DMG Autumn meetings now and I am pleased that I have not yet had any reports of frayed tempers and this is to the credit of deer managers at a time where there is potential for conflict. We continue to work on the *Finding the Common Ground* project and I have had good reports from those that have been part of it so far. This project will continue over the next six months and I believe will have had a positive impact. It is to the credit of the deer sector that at a time when things are so uncertain, two years after the Deer Working Group report was published, with little direction from Scottish Government we are still able to maintain constructive conversations and continue meaningful collaborative deer management.

Deer Management Groups provide Scottish Government with a wealth of knowledge and information on deer numbers, cull figures, cull targets, habitat quality, woodland creation data and peatland restoration information. We have a falling deer population that continues to drop in line with carefully considered population models. All voluntarily and with little cost to the public purse. None of the above can be demonstrated for the rest of Scotland or the UK. Yet the mantra that we keep hearing from Scottish Government is that they just want less deer. But to what end? When will numbers be at what they perceive to be at an acceptable level? Will 10 deer per sq km suffice or will we face another shifting of the goalposts once Groups achieve this?

I must apologise if this is all a little gloomy, but we should be in no doubt that change is on the way. Some of it will be positive but much of it will challenge the upland deer sector. Pinning the hopes for climate change and biodiversity purely on deer is naïve and ADMG will continue to point out to NatureScot and Scottish Government that an holistic approach to land management is required. As an organisation we have been heartened by the increased levels of discussion we have had both with the Strategic Deer Board and with Ministers. Deer Management Groups have achieved an awful lot over the last ten years and there is much to be proud of and ADMG will continue to press this whenever we can.