

Annual Review

2022 / 2023



Photo Laurie Campbell.



Tom Turnbull, Chairman
Association of Deer Management Groups

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Over the last year we have started to see some indications from Scottish Government on the future of deer management in the Highlands. We have been told about the ambitious targets for biodiversity and climate change and that our Government wants deer reductions across Scotland. Whilst ADMG can understand the urgency for Government to start work towards these important targets we feel that we are currently still some way from finding out exactly what the future holds for DMGs.

We remain in a limbo that has in large part been created by the Deer Working Group Report and its subsequent accepted recommendations. But it's not just deer management where we await some clarity – Scottish Government is currently consulting on the Scottish Biodiversity Programme, future grant support for forestry, and land reform and agricultural policy. Whilst all of this is up in the air land managers are

expected to plan for the future, reverse biodiversity loss and contribute to the fight against climate change. It is incredibly frustrating to me that ADMG members are under pressure to change practice without any confirmation of what the future holds.

Whilst 10 deer per sq km is the figure used in the Deer Working Group Report as a target density to be achieved across all landholdings I believe there is a naivety in Scottish Government about what this might deliver. In reality, those of us who have tried to establish trees know that deer numbers need to be at least below three deer per sq km for trees to grow without fencing and even then, with little seed source in some areas or without additional planting, trees may not appear for many years if at all. Progress can be incredibly slow at times and without deer fencing it can take just one deer wandering through some regeneration to set progress back several years.

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One of the many superb photos by Glyn Satterley in the Book Deer People. Proceeds from the sale of the book go towards placements overseas for young professionals from the deer management sector.

It is also important that expectations are realistic and tempered and that we do not embark on a quest to deliver targets for tree cover that will be impossible to achieve in reality and determined by factors that are not just limited to grazing by herbivores. This is the topic of my lead article in the latest issue of SCOPE.

We have engaged with the Deer Management Round Table, Scottish Ministers, NatureScot and the Strategic Deer Board and we will continue to do so to represent the concerns of our membership. However, despite regularly hearing from NatureScot that “we just want less deer” we still await confirmation on how land managers are expected to reduce deer numbers across the board, maintain medium term employment and replace the potential loss of income that will come with fewer deer.

ADMG met with the Strategic Deer Board and we made known our hopes and concerns for the future of deer management, rural support and the four Deer Board workstreams of incentives, regulation, operational delivery and legislation. We have also requested further involvement as the representatives of a great many stakeholders and continue to feed into this progress through the Deer Management Round Table, of which the last meeting was held on 20 December.

I still strongly believe that ADMG members are in a great position to take a lead in addressing climate and biodiversity challenges; however, many are understandably not willing to jeopardise their livelihoods with drastic deer reductions on the whim of the Scottish Government which is currently unwilling to help facilitate

this sort of work. Current schemes are unwieldy to the point of being prohibitive to enter into. Flexibility is vital and the ability to experiment and work with often marginal land could have huge benefits. Presently this is simply not possible and too often the system itself stands in the way of progress. ADMG has been pushing this point with the Strategic Deer Board, NatureScot and Ministers and I believe that we are starting to be heard.

Lorna Slater, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity recently confirmed that ADMG will be part of the Stakeholder Engagement Group as the Biodiversity programme is developed. We have been able constructively to influence some of the tone of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy with less focus purely on deer as if they were the only problem and put forward an increasingly holistic approach that more widely recognises the impacts of all herbivores in respect of upland habitats, something that was glaringly omitted from the original consultation and it has surprisingly taken years of repetition to get this point accepted.

With regard to venison, and as we finish one season and await the start of the stags in July, I would like to reflect on the pressures that were reported across much of the Highlands during the tail end of the last stag season. There is little doubt that some people were struggling with collections and had full larders which caused uneasiness for many.

Ruaridh Waugh from Ardgay Game who is speaking at our AGM will highlight some of the problems that the processors face and how we can avoid a similar situation this season, and Dick Playfair will update us on the Scottish Venison Association and its work. Indeed, venison has been a common theme at many of the DMG meetings that I have been invited to attend.

The venison price is still yet to recover to pre Covid-19 levels, we are being encouraged to shoot more and more deer and there seem to be fewer and fewer processors with real localised pressures in some areas. The SVA runs on a very small budget and it is clear that we need to consider how we promote venison to a wider audience. This would obviously come at a cost and, as producers, this would fall partly on us but also, I suggest, on the processors too.

We all have to be aware that the glut of venison hitting the market at the end of the stag season needs to be avoided wherever possible or in the very least that it is planned for. Estates should liaise with their game dealer and ensure that they have the capacity to collect the stags that you plan to shoot over the season. Try also to shoot cull stags early on when the pressure is off the processors and ensure that you have the appropriate larder facilities to provide the quality of venison for the human food chain, upgrading where necessary. Also, you should, if at all possible, be SQWV assured.

For some ADMG members access can be a real challenge during busy times of the stalking season. If anything, access has increased following the pandemic and many report that some access takers are less aware of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and that there is a reduction in prior contact between some access takers and land managers. To help this ADMG has created the Upland Deer Management sub group of the National Access Forum (NAF). It is hoped that through this group we can deliver a clear consistent message to access takers that deer management is taking place and that this needs to be considered carefully when accessing the hills, particularly in light of increased pressures on deer managers to achieve culls. I would like to thank Frank Spencer-Nairn for all his help in setting up this group and for chairing the meetings on behalf of ADMG. If you are experiencing challenges and this can be raised

with the NAF please advise Frank or me and I hope that solutions can be found for those that have issues with disturbance and stalking.

Some of the themes that we are considering with the NAF include greater presence online of priority stalking times, where to find information on this, and consistent messaging and signage with standardised signs. All this should encourage access takers to recognise that there is a coordinated and sensible approach to engaging with them during busy stalking times. We are also looking at localised solutions for access hotspots where regular issues arise.

As you will know there has been some very highly publicised conflict around deer management in some areas of the Highlands taking place over the last few weeks. Whatever side you take it is very clear to me that we are heading into a period in which Scottish Government policy and varying objectives within DMGs

have the potential to place deer managers at odds with one another. DMGs will inevitably see conflicting objectives that will at times make working together more challenging.

I am, however, convinced that, the media, social media and other public outlets are not the forum to air these concerns. At a time when Scottish Government is scrutinising the future of deer management the voluntary principle is certainly under threat. We have seriously to consider whether the short-term gains of a story in the press or an argument on social media are worth it whilst potentially placing the process under which we all currently work at risk.

I understand the frustrations and fears that arise when heavy culls are undertaken on your march and likewise the concerns that arise when culls are not sufficient to achieve your long-term biodiversity intentions. However, retreating into corners and failing to engage will not solve these problems.



Trainee ghillie James Wilson and Balmoral Alpine from Balmoral Estate, winner of the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy for Working Hill Ponies at the 2022 GWCT Scottish Game Fair.

The challenge for all DMGs comes when the status quo is threatened, but this is also the time that it is imperative to work together and endeavour to find solutions that work for all. Often compromises will have to be found and personal prejudices put to one side, no matter how unappealing this might seem at the time.

Despite the concerns that I may have about the way some continue to portray us in the press and on social media I firmly believe that the future of deer management can be a positive one, including the future of sporting stalking.

You should all know about *Deer People*, the excellent book by Richard Cooke that combined interesting interviews with excellent photography by Glyn Satterley and paintings by Ian MacGillivray. The proceeds of its sales have been used to create the 'Deer People Fund' for education and training. This fund aims to support foreign travel for young deer managers to learn about hunting and conservation and gain valuable experience.

It's clear to me that we need to invest in the future of deer management. The next generation of stalkers are vital to continue the heritage and culture about which many of us feel so strongly. Learning about alternative sporting and conservation models elsewhere in the world can only be beneficial to young people entering the deer sector.

I am constantly impressed by the ability of DMGs to work together, increase their capacity and make informed management decisions based on the huge amount of data that is collected by members and I have enjoyed attending many DMG meetings so do please continue to invite me. We are in a strong position to meet the challenges we face head on.

Feedback from members is important and the Spring health check will enable DMGs to inform ADMG on the areas where they would like us to provide more support. We have fostered a closer working



Best Practice Pony Handling day on Grosvenor Estate's Reay Forest Estate, organised by UHI North Highland. Watch out for the full report in next issue of SCOPE, Summer 2023.

relationship with many eNGOs and this has enabled us to consider all the facets of deer management in a changing upland landscape.

The Finding the Common Ground Project has undoubtedly helped bring people closer together and we are starting to better understand the strong held opinions on all sides of the debate. We are also currently working with Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) on a protocol for DMG chairs and secretaries who face conflict within Groups and will provide a framework for how to deal with such situations going forward.

Like it or not it is an exciting time, landscape scale land management is coming to the fore and DMGs have been leading the way on this for 30 years. Opportunities are now available for people to manage land in a variety of ways and private investment is providing an alternative to the norm. There's no doubt that we will have reduced deer numbers through incentives or regulation so we must continue to consider the sporting experience that we provide.

Can it be improved? Can we do more with less? Can we charge more for an enhanced experience?

Although uncertainty continues with policy, we can be sure that the vast majority of upland deer managers are regularly liaising on culls, habitat, woodland creation, peatland restoration, venison sales, the public interest, sporting culls and many other topics.

We bring many people to the Highlands and enable them to experience the outdoors and to contribute to remote rural businesses. I would challenge our detractors to find another comparable means by which deer management can be undertaken so effectively over such a huge area of land. ADMG continues to urge Scottish Government not to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' but to work with deer managers in achieving a sustainable future for our deer management sector.