

Presentation by Tom Turnbull, Chair, ADMG

The Scottish Venison Summit – 20 November 2023

Highland deer managers take a great deal of pride in the product that they are supplying and quality assured venison culled when best practice guidance has been followed should be the most easily marketable product, green, sustainable, free range, it would appear to tick all the boxes.

I am able to visit many Deer Management Groups across the highlands and attend their meetings and a recurring theme and one that seems to crop up at every meeting is the venison market, and why is venison worth so little when they sell it in the skin but often appears to be so expensive when sold to the consumer. Great care is taken to ensure that carcasses are looked after to the best possible standards pride is taken in the quality of larder facilities, and that extraction from the hill is careful, gralloching and larder work are undertaken to avoid contamination and to ensure that a quality product is provided to the market. I know that there are anomalies out there, but the vast majority of highland stalkers take a great deal of pride in what they are sending to the game dealer and thereafter to the consumer.

Some estates have been able to add value by processing their venison themselves and this is very encouraging, but the time, investment and infrastructure required to do this is considerable and when you stop to think about the stalker's average day, it's remarkable that any of them are able to undertake processing on top of all the other roles they fulfill. At busy times of the year early starts onto the hill, often with guests, are combined with at times atrocious weather, late returns to the larder and numerous other jobs before doing it all again the next day.

For the highland estate if they are lucky, they will have perhaps three game dealers to choose from to sell their venison. I know from personal experience that some areas only have one accessible dealer and on some Islands, there is no one to sell 'in skin venison' to and it has to be processed and sold locally.

Most estates will have the ATV or pony to extract deer from the hill, a 4x4, estate rifle, bullets, fuel and of course an experienced stalker with perhaps a ghillie too. Some estates will have multiple stalkers and ghillies. None of the above comes cheaply and that's prior to providing the sort of lardering facilities that most game dealers now require for collection to take place. The net cost per kilo of venison produced in the highlands is £2.58 per kilo. So, before you start your day on the hill, you know you will be making a loss on that carcass. I know that many are bored of stalkers, managers, or owners complaining about the price of venison but frankly, they may just have point.

I understand the pressure to extend the cull away from the red deer rut when carcasses are less palatable, but currently it is clear that for many estates the costs then are covered by the value of the sporting stalking and people want to stalk during the rut. Anyone who has been out on the hill in early October, on a fine day, will know just how special it is to be in amongst the roaring stags. To really shift the male cull further then the price paid for early stag venison will need to be significantly higher or we need to consider charging considerably more for stags shot during the rut, something we have already started to discuss with members.

The ambitious targets that the Scottish Government has now put in place for climate and biodiversity mean that increased culls of deer are required. Annually Scottish Government is expecting an increased cull across Scotland of 50,000 deer with a proposed review after five years. Whilst I do believe that this cull is achievable, will we have the ability to deal with this cull, process it market it and will there be a market to sell the product to?

It is vital that Scottish Venison which currently runs on a shoe string is able to be better funded and this is something that I hope to ask the ADMG members to help with at the next AGM. Increased funding from the producers will help a bit and I hope that some of the processors will feel able to increase their support, but this is only part of the solution.

The Strategic Deer Board is tasked with implementing the 90 accepted recommendations contained in the 2019 Deer Working Group Report. It has created four workstreams, regulation, legislation, operational delivery and incentives. I do hope that serious consideration is being given to the latter, as I have already mentioned deer management is costly and not just in the highlands, indeed the overheads in the lowlands are even greater and the infrastructure to processing is often less available or simply not there.

I was very pleased that following the Finding the Common Ground Forum mediation work that the upland deer sector has been engaged in, ADMG and Environment LINK for the first time, were able to co-sign a letter to Lorna Slater MSP drafted by Scottish Venison suggesting that a potential incentive to increase culls would be for the introduction of a subsidised venison price. It was clear that in the highlands, organisations that had previously not always seen eye to eye were convinced of the value of incentives for deer management based around venison. It is hoped that a pilot scheme might be implemented to test this.

I do feel strongly that one of the best incentives that Scottish Government could provide for deer management, not only in the highlands but across Scotland would be to help to ensure that we have a thriving venison sector and help to increase the numbers of people that eat venison.

An awful lot has been asked of ADMG members over the last fifteen years. Deer Management Groups have been assessed three times, on 101 criteria, the improvements were enormous and received recognition from NatureScot in their 2019 Deer Review. This was blown out of the water by the Deer Working Group Report however, and the calls for increased culls in the light of the climate and biodiversity crises. So, despite the improvements more has been asked of them and I have little doubt that they will rise to the challenge despite the lack of recognition given to them. The highland deer manager comes in for an awful lot of stick but as far as I am aware it is the only part of the UK where deer numbers can be proven to be dropping for a number of years. I feel sure that with a healthy venison market in place deer numbers will continue to drop in line with Scottish Government targets, but without that market it is very clear to me that those targets will likely fall by the wayside. Venison must not be viewed as a by-product of deer reductions but as the go to, everyday choice of meat for everyone in society and for this to happen it needs to be made available to all.

This is not straightforward, and I don't have the solutions, but I do know that producers and processors may need to put their hands in their pockets to support Scottish Venison further.

Scottish Government has been extremely helpful particularly during the Covid recovery period but with increased expectations on deer managers to do more across the whole of Scotland and not just the highlands support from Scottish Government will be vital to take our and their ambitions forward.