

## **Address by Tom Turnbull to ADMG Meeting, Fishmongers Hall, London**

13 November 2023

Good evening everyone, thank you for coming to the Fishmongers Hall for an evening with ADMG. We are extremely grateful to the Fishmongers Company for hosting us tonight in these beautiful surroundings and to Andrew Wallace and his team for making it all possible. I must admit that I don't venture into London that regularly, however these surroundings may well encourage me south a little more often.

So why are we all here? We felt that this was good timing to contact some of you who, due to geography and time, are less likely to regularly attend some of our meetings north of the border. I firmly believe we face some of the greatest changes to deer management that we have ever seen in Scotland. The close season for stags has now gone and with it we have lost some of the checks and balances that the authorisation process provided, and the possible hind season extension remains under review. We have had consultations from Scottish Government on land reform, agriculture and forestry grant schemes, all of which when announced will have ramifications for deer management, meanwhile we are formulating our response to the Scottish biodiversity strategy consultation which sets out some broad density targets for Scotland that could place deer managers throughout Scotland and not just Deer Management Groups under greater scrutiny.

It is very clear to me that land management objectives are changing, and Deer Management Groups are becoming more diverse. Collaborative deer management will in some areas become more demanding because of members varying deer management objectives. I firmly believe that now is the time that the value of DMGs can be demonstrated more than ever and if we manage our ground in isolation with no idea of what is happening to the deer on neighboring ground we will create problems for ourselves, no matter how different our neighbors intentions might be. Working with them is likely to prove more fruitful than burying our heads in the sand or butting heads.

To this end I have been very impressed by the mediation process that ADMG has helped to create with Environment LINK and others. The Finding the Common Ground project has over two years brought together organisations, land managers and deer management practitioners from a variety of backgrounds many of whom have historically very publicly disagreed with one another to find a way to establish a template for more reasonable discussions on deer management. 27 organisations have now signed the Common Ground Accord that sets out seven commitments including identifying a common purpose, respecting others objectives, and working to mutually beneficial solutions. We have now seen the creation of the Common Ground Forum which aims to take forward the priorities identified over the last two years. It is clear that we are all not going to agree on everything all the time but there are some very significant areas where we believe a more united approach would help.

An example of where we have already seen a step forward is a recent letter written by Scottish Venison to Lorna Slater MSP and signed by both ADMG and Environment LINK, suggesting that with increased culls demanded across much of the highlands and currently low venison prices, a subsidised venison price would be a good way to incentivise deer management and provide added value for deer managers. The value of putting to one side the historic disputes means that on those things we can agree on we can hopefully gain some traction.

Over the next year we will be seeing the introduction of an Environment Bill to implement many of the recommendations from the 2020 Deer Working Group Report. Statutory cull targets and returns are being considered and there is little doubt that NatureScot will be putting pressure on estates and deer management groups to reduce deer numbers if they currently have more than 10 deer per sq km.

Times are clearly changing and ADMG will endeavour to represent our membership through this period, however challenging some of the proposals might be, but I do feel that there are many positives to grasp for land managers, opportunities to undertake riparian planting, peatland restoration and changes to agricultural practice. These should I hope all be encouraged by a more flexible system of support. The Strategic Deer Board set up to implement the Deer Working Group Recommendations is seriously discussing incentives for deer management. I firmly believe that those of us lucky enough to work on, own or manage land always want to leave it in a better condition than we took it on, and I hope that this may be facilitated rather than frustrated by new Scottish Government policy.

Deer Management Groups can be extremely proud of what they have achieved over the last few years. When assessed three times over a six-year period I believe we outperformed what NatureScot and Scottish Government expected of us and I feel it's likely that no matter how difficult change feels at the moment we will outperform ambitious government targets once again. The value of working on a landscape scale is clear and, despite the pressures that we might encounter, collaborative working will be even more important as we enter a new period for upland deer management.

We are now going to hear from the team at Reay Forest from Ben Mardall, Estate Manager and David Allison, head stalker on the changes that are being implemented, including, improved riparian woodland creation, reduced deer numbers and the challenges that brings whilst also maintaining the history and heritage of a highland estate.