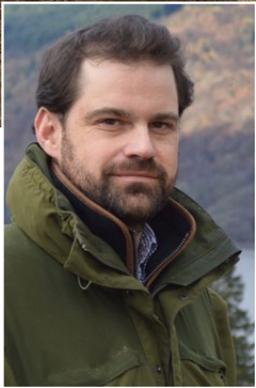




Sìan Addison/Rewilding Affric Highlands



Tom Turnbull, Chair
Association of Deer Management Groups

A tough year - but one where deer managers can claim some degree of success

When the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill is granted Royal Assent it will significantly reshape environmental management practices across Scotland, bringing about substantial changes for those involved in deer management.

ADMG and its representatives actively participated throughout consultation around the Bill. It has been encouraging to witness both Jim Fairlie, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, members of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee as well as individual MSPs acknowledge the importance of collaborative deer management and recognise the vital role that deer managers fulfill.

A new Deer Management and Venison Plan will be established, including the promotion of venison and the creation of incentives for effective deer management, both of which are vital for ADMG. This underscores the significant contribution of the Common Ground Forum in bringing together deer managers and several representative organisations to identify and agree upon common ground.

Proposals introduced at Stage 2 of the Bill regarding occupiers' rights prompted considerable concern among ADMG members. However, these concerns

were acknowledged when raised with the Minister and Scottish Government officials. Although the amendment has remained, there is a commitment to consult further with ADMG and other sector representatives. Importantly, secondary legislation will be required before new proposals on occupiers' rights can be implemented.

While ADMG and others have welcomed the removal of Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (DMNROs), significant reservations remain surrounding the introduction of Section 6ZB of the Deer Act. Despite repeated requests for clarification over the past year, details about how the new triggers for intervention will be applied and which areas of the Highlands might be prioritised for their use remain unclear.

Under the new legislation, NatureScot intervention will be possible based on potential restoration or enhancement outcomes if deer numbers are reduced. However, there is still a lack of clarity regarding how Section 6ZB will be implemented. Ongoing discussions during the development of the Code of Practice are expected to address these triggers for intervention, yet concerns persist that the new powers remain opaque.

The Natural Environment Bill has proven to be both divisive and time-consuming. There is a sense that, had the deer sector received the same support, encouragement, and incentives as other rural sectors, the Scottish Government might have progressed further towards its targets without resorting to ambiguous and contentious legislation. Nonetheless, the more proactive approach of the Scottish Government in consulting with the sector through the passage of the Bill has been noteworthy.

Concurrent with the final deliberations on the Bill, the Scottish Government in its Budget announced changes to the Small Business Bonus Relief, which had been a benefit to deer forests. The news of the removal of this exemption, except in a very limited number of situations, was met with considerable anger amongst members. However, after practitioners' concerns were raised with the Minister and government

officials, an exemption has been added through secondary legislation covering deer shot and made available for human consumption as venison. Whilst the conversations around SBBS will continue, and the law will still remain open to interpretation by the Assessors, we feel this has been a significant step forward.

The combination of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill and changes to non-domestic rates have made the past year challenging and exceptionally busy. Political engagement at a level that will be effective, covering discussions with Cabinet Secretary and Ministers, their officials, Committees and their officers and individual MSPs, the developing of amendments and the presentation of our arguments often on a daily basis, has been both testing and time consuming. But I am pleased with our efforts, and while further obstacles are likely, there is no doubt that the upland deer management sector's

concerns are increasingly being heard and listened to. Politicians and government representatives are recognising the value of collaborative deer management, leading to some modest successes. The ongoing discussions about the new Code of Practice for Deer Management will be critical, but I have some optimism that the sector will continue to have a voice and its input respected. Throughout we will continue to stress the importance of the positive contributions made by our upland deer managers at minimal cost to the public purse.

I would like to extend my thanks to all those members that have provided feedback and support over the last year, and particularly to the rest of the team at ADMG who have worked hard to engage with Ministers and Scottish Government officials to argue the case for the upland deer sector.

Six 'asks' of Scotland's future Government from the Association of Deer Management Groups

Support collaboration and the voluntary principle

Work with us to build on the success of ADMG members who have led the way in the delivery of co-ordinated, collaborative deer management across Scotland's uplands over the last 20 years providing landscape scale, nature-based solutions both for the environment and for rural communities.

Provide practical and impactful incentives

Work with us to develop actions and funding that will secure sustainable deer management for the future, including our shared ambition with Government for a buoyant, resilient venison market – one that ensures a fair return to the primary producer.

Prioritise inclusion

Work with us to include deer managers and their representative organisations in the decision-making process particularly where it affects livelihoods, rural resilience and 'just transition' so that change is undertaken with them, not to them, or without them.

Give credit

Work with us in recognising the work that deer managers have done and are doing to support Scottish Government's objectives in combatting the twin crises of the climate emergency and biodiversity loss.

Safeguard deer welfare

Work with us to ensure we maintain the highest standards of deer welfare in all aspects of deer management.

Use common sense

Work with us to provide clarity to the deer management sector on their responsibilities and the expectations of Government in light of new deer legislation, and a fair and proportionate use of legislation where required.



Red deer stag. Photo: Lorne Gill, NatureScot

Mountain habitats improving after deer management efforts

Habitat conditions have improved across a popular Highland mountain range following long-term collaborative efforts to reduce deer densities in the area.

Landowners and managers in North Ross have been working with NatureScot since 2020 through a voluntary agreement to control deer to lower the pressure from grazing and trampling on the protected blanket bog and mountain grasslands at Beinn Dearg, near Ullapool.

Herbivore impact assessments have found significantly reduced impacts since 2013 with 88% of plots registering either low or moderate/low browsing. Meanwhile 76% of plots fell into the lower impact categories for trampling impacts.

With deer cull targets met and habitats improving, the formal control agreement, which covers around 87,832 ha stretching from Ullapool almost to Ardgay, will now come to an end.

The North Ross Deer Management Group (DMG) is developing a future deer management plan to support the continued improvement of the site, which is both a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

James Hall, Chair of the North Ross DMG, said:

"The North Ross Group has been working with partners on the Beinn Dearg designated site for many years, with focused deer culls completed by the land managers in

the Group, supported on occasion by NatureScot. This has been done under a voluntary agreement reflecting a common interest in habitat improvement across the area.

"The Group will continue to manage deer numbers and to further improve our understanding of what impacts the wild deer behaviour around the site, including gaining a better understanding of the human interactions in this popular walking and mountaineering area.

"We are keen to work with a range of interests in an effort to protect this Site of Special Scientific Interest, whilst also recognising that the site requires a degree of herbivore activity, in terms of grazing of the special grasses, to ensure they survive and thrive."

Chris Donald, NatureScot's Head of Operations for Central Highland, said:

"The progress made in North Ross is a great example of collaboration and cooperation between private land managers and the public sector. Deer stalkers and the deer management group have made this agreement a great success, working together to help the special habitats of this area recover.

"We will continue to support the North Ross Deer Management Group to develop their new deer management plan. This will be a long-term commitment to ensure deer management reflects habitat condition, contributes towards meeting nature and climate targets and also benefits the deer population in that area."



Victor Clements

Sporting rates – a useful means to raise money for community development, or just a barrier to progress for nature restoration?

The proposal in the 2026 Scottish Budget for the removal of the exemption for non-domestic rates under the Small Business Bonus Scheme unless for businesses working exclusively for deer management, environmental work, or vermin control and other limited exceptions took the sector by total surprise.

Now resolved to some extent by the exemption being broadened through secondary legislation to include venison for human consumption this article examines the amounts that have been raised since sporting rates were re-introduced in 2017 and where this money has gone.

Deer are seen as a barrier to progress, and much of the legislation is focused on how best to legislate and achieve change in their management. There is little discussion about incentivising change, although that would be a better way.

We have been here before.

Sporting rates

When sporting rates were re-introduced by the Scottish Parliament in the Land Reform Bill of 2016, they were obviously resisted (unsuccessfully) by many estates and their representative bodies, but there was a provision made that these rates might be waived if properties signed up to an agreed deer management plan. This provision was never implemented. It was local authorities who had responsibility for collecting such rates, it didn't matter much to them how the process operated, and there was never any direction on how such a provision might work. Any monies raised were to be passed to the Scottish Government, and these sums used to help fund community buy-outs of land.

Signals

There are two notable anomalies of the sporting tax system. One is that whatever mixture of private and public interests a property might deliver, the government will tax them for it anyway. The second is that woodland, which government says it wants, is taxed more than open ground. In a coherent tax system, a government would tax practices and behaviours that it does not want, and exempt practices which it does want. But in this case, it is actively discouraging the type of land use it says it wants. Some people will say the amount levied per hectare is not that much. However, it is charged annually, and this accumulates over a period of time. It also sends out a strong signal. That signal is, "Government does not know what it wants!"

Incentivising progress

At the same time, government has high expectations in what we should be doing with our land. It wants people to invest, because it knows that it can only contribute a proportion of the cost of doing this itself. For this reason, mixed signals are very damaging, much more so than the value of any funds raised. We need to create an atmosphere in which farms and estates are more confident to invest in the future. For their own reasons, yes, but also to help deliver more of that public interest which is good for everyone.

The value of sporting rates

Conservative MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Murdo Fraser, asked a written parliamentary question (PQ) towards the end of 2025 to find out the amount of money raised through sporting taxes in all local authority areas in the last five years.

The information is presented opposite:

Table 1: Estimated net NDR income (£) from shooting rights, 2020–2021 to 2024–2025

Council area	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024	2024–2025
Aberdeen City	6,000	7,000	5,000	4,000	4,000
Aberdeenshire	206,000	114,000	89,000	105,000	140,000
Angus	72,000	69,000	67,000	103,000	108,000
Argyll and Bute	316,000	194,000	257,000	219,000	253,000
City of Edinburgh	[low]	4,000	1,000	3,000	2,000
Clackmannanshire	3,000	3,000	4,000	3,000	9,000
Dumfries and Galloway	202,000	175,000	154,000	94,000	103,000
Dundee City	[low]	[low]	[low]	1,000	[low]
East Ayrshire	32,000	34,000	27,000	64,000	36,000
East Dunbartonshire	5,000	3,000	3,000	4,000	4,000
East Lothian	3,000	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000
East Renfrewshire	2,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
Falkirk	3,000	3,000	2,000	12,000	2,000
Fife	30,000	23,000	19,000	43,000	19,000
Glasgow City	0	0	0	0	0
Highland	597,000	485,000	404,000	935,000	587,000
Inverclyde	1,000	1,000	3,000	2,000	[low]
Midlothian	6,000	11,000	6,000	8,000	7,000
Moray	125,000	102,000	73,000	184,000	123,000
Na h-Eileanan Siar	28,000	19,000	16,000	44,000	13,000
North Ayrshire	20,000	13,000	12,000	5,000	4,000
North Lanarkshire	7,000	5,000	6,000	5,000	5,000
Orkney Islands	5,000	7,000	4,000	3,000	3,000
Perth and Kinross	141,000	131,000	104,000	299,000	308,000
Renfrewshire	2,000	6,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
Scottish Borders	135,000	110,000	81,000	141,000	182,000
Shetland Islands	7,000	7,000	6,000	38,000	20,000
South Ayrshire	32,000	29,000	46,000	24,000	25,000
South Lanarkshire	49,000	38,000	41,000	30,000	48,000
Stirling	76,000	68,000	64,000	66,000	68,000
West Dunbartonshire	6,000	3,000	6,000	4,000	3,000
West Lothian	5,000	5,000	2,000	3,000	2,000
Scotland	2,121,000	1,676,000	1,509,000	2,452,000	2,084,000

Source: SG estimates, based on NDR billing data as at 1 July 2020, 1 June 2021, 1 July 2022, 1 July 2023, and 1 June 2024; NDR valuation data as at 1 October in each year.

The amount of money raised averages out at around £2 million annually. This funds about a third of the annual spend on buying out land for communities, although for context, the money paid out now is much less than it was prior to 2016, even with the sporting tax money. So, this is not funding additional community buyouts.

Better use of money

At a national scale, £2 million is a small amount of money when it comes to land management, but the signal sent by it is very strong, and counterproductive.

The 2026 provision by Mike Russell MSP was that sporting tax could be waived for properties who signed up to an agreed deer management plan. There is already legislation in place to do this. If this was implemented now going forward, it would send a very positive signal that government wanted farms and estates to work

together, and if they did so, they would be rewarded for doing this. On the back of this, there would be all sorts of public interest arising, well in excess of the £2 million given up, or that proportion of this within those areas who were managing deer in the way that government would like.

All politicians should be aware of the tools that are already in the box, but which are not currently used. The sporting rates exemption is one. Deer panels are another. The grounds for intervention under the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 are largely there already as well.

The new Scottish Government needs to combine clear and coherent signals with a willingness to enforce as required, but always having an eye on the cost involved. Waiving sporting tax across the board, as some will still be liable and exemption will be open to interpretation by the assessors, would be a very powerful and cost-effective statement which

acknowledges good practice in a meaningful and demonstrable way.

That could happen tomorrow. It just needs parliamentary direction and consent. And if we really wanted to look coherent, the 2025 Land Reform Bill has a requirement for properties over a certain size to have a land management plan. Removing sporting taxes would be a very powerful signal to see that these are done to a recognised standard, updated as required, and implemented. That would be a very good outcome if it can be made to work, with a bit of give and take on both sides.

Victor Clements is a native woodland advisor working in Highland Perthshire. He is secretary to a number of deer management groups and has worked extensively on deer management plans throughout Scotland over the past fifteen years, and on native woodland schemes for long before that.



Callum Leavey-Wilson, Institute of Geography, School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh

Locking antlers: a ‘levels of conflict’ analysis of upland deer management in the Scottish Highlands

Conflicts over the use and management of rural land, wildlife and other natural resources tend to involve multiple layers of contention, beyond the issues that are most readily observable.

We illustrate this in the case of upland deer management in the Scottish Highlands, which has been the subject of fierce debate for many years.

Drawing on the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders and applying an adapted ‘levels of conflict’ framework, we show that whilst the superficial manifestation of this dispute concerns deer numbers, their impacts and methods of management, beneath this sit underlying factors of historical controversy, blame and mistrust between parties as well as tensions around the individual and collective identities of stakeholders in a changing rural landscape.

The framework acts as a useful tool that reconfirms the complexities of this case whilst allowing them to be more easily understood, providing a fresh insight into this long-running issue.

Callum Leavey-Wilson, Janet Fisher, Sam Staddon

The full research paper is published in the Journal of Rural Sciences, October 2025: [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016725002347?via%3Dihub](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016725002347?via%3Dihub)

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Calum Brown, David Butkowsky, Ewan Paterson, Keir Smith, David Tulloch, Cathy Atkinson, Penelope Whitehorn

The ungulate pretender: why the non-native Sika deer may become Scotland’s new Monarch of the Glen

High deer densities conflict with carbon sequestration and nature restoration objectives in Scotland, and heavy culling is increasingly common, alongside woodland expansion.

To date, there is little coordination of deer control to address the spread of the non-native Sika deer.

Sika differ from native species in several ways that make them more likely to occupy newly created woodland habitat, achieve high densities, cause environmental damage and evade culling.

In the absence of strategic management, there is a risk that culling has limited or perverse outcomes for Scotland’s natural environments and native deer

by reinforcing Sika’s advantages, inadvertently creating a population dominated by non-native deer and hybrids.

We, a group of ecologists, deer managers and foresters, use our own experience alongside existing literature to highlight the challenges of, and to make a series of recommendations for, coordinated Sika management.

Solution. We call for official recognition of the threats posed by Sika as an invasive non-native species, in order to support strategic control of Sika populations at the edges of their range and at key points within them. This control can benefit enormously from collaborative evidence gathering using new technologies such as drone-based censuses, information sharing and coordinated culls.

Calum Brown, Institute of Meteorology and Climate Research, Atmospheric Environmental Research (IMK-IFU), Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Published in the British Ecological Society Journal, November 2025 here: besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/2688-8319.70154



Sika stag. Photo: Colourbox



Photo: Colourbox

Killian J Murphy, Laboratory of Wildlife Ecology and Behaviour, SBES, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Understanding deer management dilemmas: A mixed methods approach to understand diverse stakeholder values in human-wildlife conflicts

Wildlife conservation and management is evolving to address new challenges that encompass diverse socio-economic, political, and ecological demands.

The traditional expert-driven approach has shifted towards an inclusive stakeholder-driven form of management, necessitating multidisciplinary research and stakeholder input. Modern wildlife management therefore requires the bridging of research and practice, with policymakers balancing the needs of stakeholders and evidence to implement robust systems of management.

To understand the challenges of wildlife management in the face of stakeholder conflict, we undertook a multidisciplinary study of stakeholder views focusing on deer management in Ireland as an example. The highest ranked issues identified related to increasing deer numbers were biodiversity loss and road traffic accidents risk.

However, there was evidence that importance ranking depended on a person's landownership status,

their self-identified background (urban or rural), or what country they came from (Ireland vs other). The ranking of management options and impediments to progress also varied by stakeholder type (eg hunters; farmers). However, there was a large degree of consensus on culling being an important management tool and collaboration as a means of overcoming obstacles.

Qualitative analysis highlighted six core themes, including the perceived problems from excessive deer populations, the need for better management systems, and differing views on state and non-state actors responsibility for deer problems. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, our study provides a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives on deer management.

This mixed-methods approach highlighted the divergent priorities of stakeholders, influenced by their backgrounds and values, particularly on key areas of human-wildlife conflict surrounding these species. While common ground was found in identifying key impacts and

management solutions, the need for enhanced collaboration and tailored strategies emerged as critical.

Finally, we discuss how drawing lessons from successful models in other jurisdictions, and investing in research, monitoring, and education, is essential for designing future effective and sustainable wildlife management in Ireland.

This study examines how conflicting stakeholder values can exacerbate human-wildlife conflict. However, by understanding these issues thoroughly, targeted monitoring and management systems can be designed to alleviate conflict.

Research paper published by Springer Nature July 2025
rdcu.be/e3fe0

Murphy, K.J., Kenny, U., Ciuti, S. et al. *Understanding deer management dilemmas: A mixed methods approach to understand diverse stakeholder values in human-wildlife conflicts*. *Eur J Wildl Res* 71, 78 (2025)

Researchers are tracking the movement of red deer in the Highlands of Scotland using GPS collars as part of a new project

This project will provide information on how the deer move around the area, where they prefer to be and how they use the landscape. The team will also analyse how the deer respond to human activities such as fencing off land, culling and commercial stalking.

Deer management

Results of the project will help land managers decide on how best to manage deer health, numbers and habitats. The scientific evidence will feed into decisions by different landowners about how to manage deer densities and restore native woodlands and peatlands.

Red deer are a vital part of the Scottish Highlands, but increased numbers are a major barrier to the large-scale natural regeneration of native woodlands. Deer management is therefore a much-debated topic in Scotland with a need for scientific data to inform decisions on how to manage it going forward.

Role of red deer

The study is a partnership between charity Affric Highlands and Durham University, supported by the Association of Deer Management Groups. The partners are working closely with landowners and deer managers, including deer stalkers from sporting estates. In total, GPS collars will be fitted to 22 stags in the area from Glen Affric to the west coast.

The red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) is Scotland's largest surviving land mammal, which plays a crucial role in natural processes. They shape the landscape by grazing grasses, browsing tree shoots and shrubs, and trampling and wallowing.

Find out more

- The project involves Dr Eilidh Smith and Professor Phil Stephens from the University of Durham Department of Biosciences.
- Affric Highlands is a community-focused initiative which aims to restore nature and create social and economic benefits across more than 200,000 hectares of the central Highlands over the next 30 years.
- The project, which adheres to the highest standards of animal welfare, has been granted a licence by the UK Home Office, and was approved by Durham University's Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body. Capture protocols were designed in close collaboration with veterinarian Dr Neil Anderson from the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies.
- The University of Durham Department of Biosciences is ranked fifth in the UK in the Complete University Guide 2025.

There is a fundraising campaign running to support this important research. Donations are welcome and you can contribute via this link. Thank you. affrichighlands.org/deercollaring



Photo: Sián Addison/Rewilding Affric Highlands

Fundraising reception for the Common Ground Forum at Fishmongers' Hall, London

Evolving out of a joint project between ADMG and Scottish Environment LINK, the Common Ground Forum introduced civic mediation techniques to build trust, foster respectful discussions and achieve positive collaboration in the deer management sector in upland Scotland.

Through strengthened relationships, CGF members are actively contributing to policy development and advocacy for everyone engaged in deer management and working to ensure a just transition for all. The Forum's ground-breaking initiative won the Nature of Scotland Awards Innovation Award in 2024, and its influence reached Holyrood during the new Natural Environment Bill process.

The Forum has facilitated opportunities for all those directly involved in deer management to be heard and provides space for various practice groups, including stalkers, foresters, NatureScot, and eNGO staff to discuss current issues, enable challenging conversations to happen and help the sector move towards a sustainable deer management

model. A cultural shift requires a critical mass, so the Forum supports peer ambassadors with training to develop the skills and confidence to become 'change makers' in their sectors.

The big challenge for the next few years is to embed the Common Ground approach and find resolution on any issues arising from new legislation and land management objectives. Expanding the reach of the CGF will help to widen the impact of its work and embed a legacy.

To get the fundraising ball rolling for 2026 and celebrate its many achievements, the Forum together with ADMG held a reception at the end of January, kindly hosted at Fishmongers' Hall by Andrew Wallace, Director of Fisheries. The Fishmongers' Company has stood on the banks of the Thames for over 700 years, and its Charitable Trust supports a range of work in connection with fisheries. Deer management plays a key role in restoring river catchments by balancing browsing pressure for vegetation regeneration, which in turn benefits aquatic habitats.

Landowners and managers from across Scotland were treated to an introduction to the work of the CGF by Andrew, followed by a double-act demonstration of the collaborative process by Tom Turnbull, ADMG Chair, and Julie Stoneman, CGF Chair and Programme Manager for Saving Scotland's Rainforest. A short film, produced jointly with Scotland: The Big Picture's Fiadh project, explored the constructive approach of the CGF, featuring views on changes in the sector from different stakeholders.

This was followed by a question and answer session to a panel chaired by Abdul Rahim, of the Centre for Good Relations, who provide mediation services for the CGF. Responses to audience queries were provided by David Allison, Head Stalker at Reay Forest Estate; Falcon Frost, Estate Ranger at Glenfalloch; Scott Bremner, of Culachy Estate; and Nicola Williamson, Field Officer at Affric Highlands. Finally, David Lowes of Glenfalloch and CGF Ambassador, summed up and appealed to attendees for their support.

While mingling over drinks and canapes after the presentations, guests were able to delve deeper with representatives of the CGF, as many had not heard of the work of the Forum before and were keen to understand more. All in all, the evening was a great success in terms of broadening engagement and raising awareness among landowners.

If you would like to know more, to become a signatory to the Common Ground Accord or make a donation, please visit the CGF website or contact:

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thecommongroundforum.scot/our-common-ground-accord/



CGF event at Fishmongers' Hall. Photo: CGF



Red deer hind and calf. Photo: Cerys Evans



John Forteith, Chair, SQWV

Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) continues to deliver strong progress on behalf of the industry

Phase One of the scheme's development has now been successfully completed and is being rolled out across the sector. The scheme has been aligned with recognised industry standards and is now managed in partnership with Food Integrity Assurance (FIA).

Oversight is provided by a newly established Technical Advisory Committee, bringing together respected experts from across the industry to ensure robust governance and continuous improvement.

Against this background we are delighted to see SQWV membership continue to grow, with around 150 producer members now accredited.

In December, working closely with a cross-section of processors, we finalised the SQWV Brand Licensing Scheme for AGHE-registered processors. This marks a significant milestone, creating a truly end-to-end quality assurance scheme that is fit for purpose and fully integrated across the supply chain. Processors are now able to market SQWV-certified product into a range of supply routes, and we are achieving increasing recognition from major retailers and wholesalers as a result.

In collaboration with Scottish Venison, SAOS and the Scottish Wholesale Association, we are hosting a dedicated venison event for Scottish wholesalers at the end of March - a key opportunity to further strengthen market engagement - and, looking ahead, SQWV is turning its attention to supporting smaller processors.

The plan is that working directly with microprocessors, we will design a proportionate and practical quality assurance pathway that reflects and supports local sourcing, ensuring inclusivity across the sector.

SQWV accreditation independently verifies compliance with the latest regulations and industry standards through auditing by FIA, and our partners at FIA are proving highly supportive, assisting members with template documentation and practical advice where needed. The scheme is helping the industry maintain the highest standards of compliance while unlocking new and previously untapped supply-chain opportunities for Scottish venison.

In today's marketplace, a credible and trusted quality assurance scheme is increasingly a prerequisite for public sector, commercial buyers - and often consumers also - when making purchasing decisions.

A strong and successful SQWV scheme drives confidence in our exceptional Scottish produce, adds value throughout the supply chain, and opens doors to new markets.

Over the coming weeks, the SQWV team will be engaging with Deer Management Groups and attending industry events. If you or your Deer Management Group would like to find out more about SQWV and what accreditation involves, please visit sqwv.co.uk or email info@sqwv.co.uk.



Launch event at Forest Field & Glen. Photo: Dick Playfair

New venison micro-processor unit now up and running at Benderloch, Appin

August last year saw the launch of a new venison chill and micro-processor unit at Forest Lodge, Benderloch, Appin.

The new facility at Forest Field and Glen will process mainly red and roe deer from Lochnell and other landholdings in the area for sale locally and to feed into the supply chain for sale further afield across Scotland and the UK.

The project is the brainchild of the Sloss Family who recognised that their area, with a growing demand to control deer numbers not least due to plans for woodland recovery and the Atlantic Rainforest, could benefit from improved facilities to process venison.

The project was supported by a grant from the Covid Recovery Fund via the Scotland Food and Drink Partnership, and by Business Gateway and HIE. The well-attended opening with around 40 guests from across local

and national food industry, agencies and local authority in the run-up to Scottish Venison Day on 4 September was blessed with glorious weather.

Presentations about the venison sector, background to the project and a celebration lunch, featuring local venison of course, took place at Lochnell Castle courtesy of the Dundonald family.

Amanda Sloss said: *"This was a milestone for us. We had thought about an initiative like this for some time and then, of all things, Covid gave us the opportunity to really put together how it might work, what sort of throughput we might generate and how to engage with the local market."*

"Everyone has been extremely supportive, and we are now up and running, and looking to further development so that soon we will be able to take carcasses from other estates and stalkers outside our own

business. We are also looking to add additional space that can be used for receptions, demonstrations and school visits."

"We have worked with Oban High School this year to educate youngsters about where venison comes from and why it is such a fantastic product, and we are keen to expand that type of work in the education sector also."

Dick Playfair, from trade body Scottish Venison, said: *"This is a brilliant initiative on so many levels. Stephen and Amanda Sloss have done a great job in making this happen and have some great ideas for the future."*

"We are pleased to have been involved with colleagues from Scotland Food and Drink, SAOS and others to support Forest Field and Glen in this venture and wish them every success in the future."

Local venison hits the menu at Inveraray Primary School

Argyll and Bute is renowned for its exceptional local produce, and now pupils at Inveraray Primary School are enjoying a taste of it in their school meals.

Argyll and Bute Council introduced wild venison to school menus on Islay and Jura in January 2025 in what was a UK first. Due to its success, the award-winning initiative has now been extended to Inveraray.

The venison served at Inveraray Primary comes from Argyll Estates and is processed by husband-and-wife team Tom and Katie Kirsop at their game larder, Argyll Game Ltd – ensuring the meat is truly local and sustainably sourced. Children played a key role in shaping the menu by taking part in taste tests to choose their favourite dishes, with wild venison burgers and bolognaise coming out on top.

Venison is a nutrient-dense food, rich in protein and low in saturated fat, making it a healthy addition to school meals. This initiative supports the council's commitment to climate-friendly, locally sourced food that reduces food miles and promotes sustainability.

Councillor Ross Moreland, Argyll and Bute Council's Policy Lead for Finance and Commercial Services, said: *"We're delighted to introduce wild venison to Inveraray Primary School. This is about making the most of high-quality local produce while teaching pupils about sustainability and healthy eating. The success of the pilot on Jura and Islay showed us what a positive impact this can have, and we're thrilled to see it expand to the mainland."*

Tom Kirsop from Argyll Game Ltd, has been working with pupils at Inveraray on a number of outdoor learning initiatives, including making and



School visit to Argyll Game, Inveraray to learn about venison with Tom Kirsop.

positioning bird boxes throughout the estate so they can monitor and identify the species. The children have also been out with Tom on the hillsides, learning in a natural environment where some of their food comes from.

Tom said: *"Having had the opportunity to help the children of Inveraray Primary with their outdoor school programme I am delighted that they have venison on the menu. The pupils visited our processing facility where they helped to produce burgers and sausages which they all loved and went home with some to try. It was really encouraging to see how interested and engaged the children were in the process from hill to plate."*

"It is wonderful the children are getting the opportunity to eat sustainably harvested wild free-range venison from the local area with almost zero food miles. Red deer venison is a highly nutritious, lean red meat, packed with protein, iron, zinc, and far less saturated fat than other protein sources. All in all, a great choice for healthy hearty meals."

The Council worked with Food for Life Scotland to develop recipes that meet Scottish Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools and the Food for Life Served Here standards.

Looking ahead, the Council will continue to monitor the project and explore opportunities to expand this initiative to more schools across Argyll and Bute.



Velebit Highlands, Croatia. Photo: Nicola Williamson



Photo: James Shooter/Rewilding Europe
Nicola Williamson

An insight into deer and wildlife management in regions of Italy, Romania and Croatia

I work as a Project Field Officer for Rewilding Affric Highlands, a landscape scale initiative to increase biodiversity and resilience for wildlife and people across South Ross-shire.

Understanding historic and contemporary deer management is a key component of achieving restoration objectives. In my own time I have been learning deer stalking, working toward my DCS level 2, supported in my learning by a knowledgeable, passionate and patient group of professional deer stalkers.

In August last year I flew out to Italy to begin a 6-week tour of three European countries, Italy, Romania and Croatia. My plan was to meet with hunters, farmers and conservationists and learn about how wildlife is valued by these different groups.

I had been awarded a funded internship through ADMG's Deer People Fund which supports young professionals working in deer management to learn about wildlife management abroad.

I was interested to learn about the conflicts and co-existence measures taking place around wildlife in these different European countries, and how their hunting systems operate in terms of counts and quotas.

Every person I spoke to across these European countries referred to the need to promote sustainable and ethical wildlife management practices including robust count data for each species, understanding their ecological needs, as well as increased engagement with all stakeholders to mitigate conflicts.

They aim to promote collaboration and opportunities to share skills, knowledge and resources. All the hunters and farmers I spoke to respect the right for predators to exist and for management to be used where needed. Education is also vital to promote the importance of healthy ecosystems to the wider community.

Humans have fundamentally altered so much of our natural environment that restoration is not simply a case of throwing some species out in an area and walking away. Re-introductions and bolstering of species need to be done with respect to the animals and an understanding of their future management. I see the value in the sustainable hunting of game species where the money generated goes back into wider conservation needs and supports local people.

In Scotland, I believe that land or natural resource management needs to happen at landscape scale, involving communities

and relevant interests as well as the owners of the land, with management objectives set at local and regional scales, as indeed many existing Deer Management Groups seek to do.

Quotas should be set and delivered locally, based on robust census data and population models, with the responsibility for delivery being shared by stakeholders. I liked what I saw of the hunting systems in Europe and believe they offer lessons for us. Scotland is my home, her landscapes, nature and culture are unique, but we have a lot of work to do to restore and enhance the nature we have lost and are losing on land and at sea.

We all need to work together to protect and enhance species, restore habitats and ensure we can still rely on the land for our livelihoods. I hope that the future of wildlife management in Scotland can bring multiple stakeholders together to support this mission.

To read my full detailed report from the three countries that I visited see: bit.ly/4lao0P0



Fin Shand

My time at Mount Etjo, Namibia

I have been a gamekeeper in Scotland my entire working life. I was working as a beatkeeper/stalker on the Invermark Estate when I was offered the opportunity to participate in the ADMG Deer People funded placement. This coincided well with a big leap I had already decided to take, taking a year out to do some travelling.

One of the placements available was the Mount Etjo Safari Lodge in Namibia, I chose this because I wanted to experience the hunting culture in a country so very different from ours, with a spectacular variety of species. It was a great chance to experience things I never had experienced before.

I left the UK in September 2024, starting off my journey in Canada to complete five weeks at a grain harvest. I then hopped over to New Zealand to work on a game farm and sporting estate for several months, then finishing off my initial travels in Australia.

From Australia I flew to Johannesburg, and then a short internal flight to Windhoek, Namibia.

You can read about my time in Namibia in my full report here: bit.ly/40SbyKo



ADMG curates a fund set up through the proceeds of the book 'Deer People'. For more information about this initiative or how to apply for a grant from it please see: deer-management.co.uk/general-info/tutorials.

Richard (Dick) Youngson – an appreciation

Dick passed away peacefully in Inverness on 29 May 2025 aged 83.

After graduating in forestry from Aberdeen University, Dick assisted with the early research on Rum into the biology and ecology of the island's red deer, a subject destined to dominate many years of his working life.

He also left a valuable legacy to the scientists in a collection of about 20 calves which he had hand-reared. The ability to handle these tame animals allowed much to be learnt about their biological cycles and the red deer gestation length. Eventually some of them went to start the first deer farm in Scotland.

Subsequently Dick moved to Edinburgh joining the Nature Conservancy but in the early 1980s made his most significant career move joining the Red Deer Commission as a field officer.

In 1991, he became the Commission's Technical Director with charge over the other field officers, employed stalkers and contractors assisting in the annual upland deer counts and aiming to cover the whole Scottish red deer range over a three-year period.

Much of his early work focused on the examination and re-drafting of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1959. His noteworthy efforts came to fruition with new legislation, the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, giving the Commission power to address all deer species (among many other new powers) and becoming the Deer Commission for Scotland (DCS).

The reformed Commission frequently found having to address new issues previously not in its remit challenging, having to deal with a new group of landowners and deer managers but this did not worry Dick – his gentle approach and friendly nature became legendary.

If Dick had to discuss a 'tricky' matter with a 'difficult' landowner, he usually achieved the outcome he wanted – using logical persuasion and his well-known charm.

Dick's knowledge of Scotland, its deer and the people involved was phenomenal and his scientific knowledge, that he was prepared to share, extensive.

His analysis of data submitted by the big deer forests enabled him to fine tune their culls to achieve their sporting stag objectives without carrying too many deer.



That he could recall, apparently, all the estate owners/managers, forest managers, rangers and stalkers by name was a fine gift, as well as a wonderful ability of making everyone he met feel like a long-lost friend.

He loved Moy and the DCS caravan where inside would be pies and sausage rolls not to mention a supply of bottles for a 'wee dram' just to cement friendship. Dick's way of thanking landowners and deer managers for their cooperation would become an annual tradition.

Shortly after his retirement in 2021 Dick was awarded the Balfour Brown Trophy, an award still sponsored by BDS and Forestry and Land Scotland and presented annually to a person considered to have made a significant contribution in the field of deer and their management in the UK. Seldom can a recipient have been more deserving of the award than Dick Youngson.

So many people have fond memories of Dick both within and outside of the deer sector. The one thing in common that many have said on hearing of his death has been "what a lovely man" and indeed he was.

Dick touched the lives of so many 'deer people' in Scotland – a complete gentleman and a thoroughly decent human being who will be greatly missed but fondly remembered by all those who knew him.

ADMG is grateful to Hugh Rose for this contribution.