

The Scottish Parliament – Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee

Evidence for the review of the impact of deer on Scotland's natural heritage from the Lowland Deer Network Scotland

Deer and their management in the lowlands of Scotland differ in many respects from that in the Highlands, where Deer Management Groups are the norm. The deer themselves include all four species to be found in Scotland, roe, red, fallow and sika although roe predominate and are to be found throughout the lowlands, including in urban areas. Unlike red deer, which are a herding species, roe deer are territorial and form family groups and occupy a much smaller range than red deer. In the deer context however there is considerable overlap between lowland and highland populations with roe deer commonly present on moorland and hill and red deer on enclosed land, particularly in winter.

The pattern of land ownership in the lowlands is also much more diverse and complex. Highland land holdings on relatively unproductive land are typically measured in thousands of acres. Lowland units tend to be very much smaller and include farms large and small, woodlands and commercial forestry, industrial and brownfield sites, recreation areas such as golf courses, domestic properties and gardens, as well as public land. Equally deer managers are drawn from a broad range of different quarters and include farmers and foresters, game keepers, forest rangers and, importantly, a large number of recreational and vocational deer managers. These latter are mostly dedicated deer enthusiasts who undertake deer management to a high level of skill at local level for their own recreation or to provide a service to land managers. Whilst the Code of Practice on Deer Management places a responsibility on those who have deer on their land to manage them sustainably, in practice many land owners and occupiers only take an interest in deer when they are either causing damage (to crops or young trees), causing problems on the roads, or causing an increase in illegal activity such as poaching, coursing or animal cruelty.

Over the last decade or more agri-environment schemes and other projects such as the Central Scotland Green Network have created new habitats for deer, often in close proximity to centres of population. Indeed deer are increasingly found in the centre of towns and cities, occupying public parkland, graveyards and other green space but also private gardens. As a consequence of the extension of suitable habitats, lowland deer numbers, roe in particular, are thought to be increasing rapidly in some areas. Although roe deer are not counted nationally it is likely that they now at least equal red deer in number across Scotland. The reported national cull of roe deer, around 30,000, is considered to be substantially understated. The Forestry Commission reports that its roe cull is rising exponentially to keep pace with a burgeoning roe population and now exceeds the cull of red deer.

Managing deer in close proximity to people is very necessary but poses particular problems and requires specialist skills and some sensitivity. Many members of the public and indeed some local authorities oppose the culling of deer. A considerable number of committed individuals have developed the skills necessary to cull deer in urban areas and are now able to offering specialist training to others.

A small but growing number of Deer Management Groups (DMGs) exists in the lowlands. However these differ in character from upland DMGs. Such Groups generally represent only partial coverage of an area, operating only over ground where they have the permission of the proprietor. Their members tend to be deer managers rather than land owners as in the Highland DMGs. In some respects lowland DMGs are more akin to syndicates or hunting clubs than to the DMGs of the Highlands. Their members are brought together by a common interest in deer stalking, to share experiences and, in some cases, resources such as deer larders. Some also make themselves available on a contractual basis.

Lowland deer management is arguably less well developed than in the Highlands at least in terms of comprehensive cover of land and cooperation between managers. The Lowland Deer Network Scotland (LDNS) was formed in 2011 to bring together the many different interests involved in lowland deer management with a view to promoting a culture of effective collaboration. This is intended to augment our capacity to manage a wild species which represents both benefits in terms of biodiversity and threats such as environmental damage to habitats, economic costs in respect of farm and forestry crops, and increasing risks to public safety, particularly due to road traffic accidents.

The general objective of LDNS is to anticipate and plan to manage deer impacts. The Network enjoys increasingly broad support and aims to offer leadership, particularly to those who may be new to the responsibility for deer management in terms of the Wildlife & Natural Environment Act 2011 and the Code of Practice for Deer Management. In particular there is a job to be done in communicating this responsibility to the many farmers, foresters, businesses and developers. Local authorities also need help in building capacity for deer management on land in Council ownership and more generally over local authority areas. This is a 'hearts and minds' exercise with an educational function and, at this early stage, progress can be said to be encouraging judging by the support from a broad range of deer management interests including existing specialist organisations such as the British Deer Society, British Association of Shooting and Conservation, Scottish Gamekeepers Association, Association of Deer Management Groups, National Farmers Union Scotland and Scottish Land and Estates; also the public bodies, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission and Forest Enterprise, Transport Scotland and the local authorities. All these interests are represented on the LDNS Executive Committee which also has links with the Police and SSPCA.

The RACCE Committee inquiry relates to the impact of deer on the natural heritage and this is perhaps less of an issue in the lowlands so far. LDNS has not been made aware that damage by deer to designated low ground sites is a significant and widespread problem, or any more so than economic damage. However, without adequate deer management planning in newly planted areas such as the Central Belt rising deer numbers may result in this being more of an issue in future. As with the increase in recorded deer/vehicle collisions, the signs are that preventative measures are required and LDNS believes that a more coordinated and cooperative approach to deer management will increase capacity to protect environmental as well economic interests and reduce risks to public safety. It will also help to develop new markets for venison from low ground deer where the supply is currently so fragmented as to be considered financially unviable by the major processors. LDNS is working with the Scottish Venison Partnership on this.

If considering the premise that further regulation of deer management would be beneficial on environmental grounds, LDNS would pose certain questions, as follows:

- 1. How would additional regulation assist in the management and control of lowland deer populations?** Deer management undertaken largely under the voluntary principle by private individuals or businesses operates within a framework of legislation and guidance which is summarised in detail in the submission of our sister organisation, the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG). With this framework it is difficult to argue that the deer sector in either highlands or lowlands is wholly unregulated or unaccountable and in our view further regulation would add little to existing effort. More bureaucracy and cost might indeed act as a deterrent as lowland deer management is reliant on a high level of unremunerated volunteer effort.
- 2. Could a regulated approach to deer management be applicable throughout Scotland, regardless of circumstance and including highlands, lowlands and urban areas?** As noted above deer management in the lowlands differs markedly in many respects from highland deer management, although they overlap.
- 3. If regulation were to be directed at the deer management group model how would it be applied where DMGs do not exist or are not the most suitable means of promoting collaborative deer management?** Our view is that in promoting higher standards and greater cooperation persuasion is likely to be more effective than regulation.
- 4. Would the number of low ground landholdings where deer are present make a regulated approach impracticable?** Potentially deer are likely to be present on every low ground landholding regardless of size although many of these holdings undertake little or no deer management at present. This applies right down to domestic property level in some circumstances.

In summary LDNS would suggest that to overlay a regulatory system on deer management over such a diverse pattern of landholdings would be a considerable challenge in terms of both cost and enforcement. The question must be asked whether such a system is deliverable, affordable, and ultimately sustainable particularly when a voluntary approach under the umbrella of LDNS, is beginning to tackle this issue at relatively little cost to the public purse.

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