

One cap must not fit all for deer management in Scotland



Richard Cooke, Chairman, LDNS

Many of those who manage deer in the lowlands will have looked at the Land Reform consultation paper issued by the Scottish Government in December, or read the headlines about it, and thought "What on earth has this got to do with me?"

And rightly so. Deer once again have found their way into the land reform debate, because deer – particularly red deer on the high ground and the open hill – are associated with large estates, tweed clad stalkers, and a tradition that does not sit comfortably it seems with a modern inclusive Scotland. And, whether that is right or wrong, it brings a risk, because to the public and to many of our politicians, a stalker is the same wherever he is. However, there is a world of difference between those who go about their business managing and culling predominantly roe deer on the low ground, in woodland and on the urban fringes, and their counterparts higher up the hill, although many of us do both.

One thing we should never stop saying to politicians is that a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. Managing roe, a territorial, non-herding species, on the low ground is a very different discipline – or vocation. It usually involves management over ground that the stalker doesn't own but leases, or where he or she provides a deer management service, doing a job that we all recognize as being necessary – sustainable deer management - to prevent economic and environmental damage, and to reduce road safety risks. And not to be forgotten is that an end product is venison for which the UK market has a growing appetite.

And yet contained in the land reform consultation are proposals to remove the current exemption for sporting rates, and for SNH to be given extra powers. What this will mean in practical terms we don't yet know but it is certainly conceivable that farmers or forest owners, perhaps including FCS, may be faced with business rates if they are considered to have 'sporting rights' and would pass them on to a sporting tenant. LDNS would prefer to see deer issues taken out of a future Land Reform Bill and considered separately. We would like to see different approaches for the areas covered by the Lowland Deer Groups and upland red deer areas.

We also need to know what is proposed for areas where there are currently no deer groups but where there are deer issues, and also how Local Authorities and the farming sector can be better encouraged to recognize their responsibilities regarding deer. We are not convinced that Government has yet thought about these aspects.

So, in fact, this consultation and the forthcoming Bill will be of interest, particularly in ensuring that one cap does not and should not fit all. Whilst there is much in common about deer management across Scotland generally, the tests and systems being applied to the upland DMGs do not translate to the low ground. And from an LDNS perspective particularly, deer management really should have very little to do with land reform.



Roe buck. Photo: Laurie Campbell

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New Minister brought up to speed with remit of LDNS

The LDNS Chairman and Secretary met in January with Dr Aileen McLeod MSP, Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform and MSP for South Scotland.

Whilst part of the meeting was devoted to matters relating to upland deer management, the work of the Lowland Deer Network was also highlighted.

Richard Cooke, LDNS Chairman, emphasised that deer management across Scotland, from red deer management in the Highlands to roe deer management in the Central Belt, multi species management in South West Scotland or roe deer management in Banff and Buchan, varies enormously and that a 'one size fits all' fully regulated approach to deer management would be enormously difficult in practice. In any case, while not fully regulated and based on the voluntary principle, deer management is framed by the Deer Act and Wildlife and Natural Environment Act, the Government Policy for deer represented in the document *Scotland's Wild Deer: A National Approach*, the Code of Practice for Deer Management, Best Practice and industry training and Competence standards.

Richard Cooke explained that the established Deer Management Group structure of the Highlands is not workable in the much more fragmented lowlands where there is a far wider range of land management interests. There are a number of very effective Lowland Deer Groups although they do not have full geographic coverage. Their members, for the most part highly motivated and well trained vocational stalkers, face quite different challenges, particularly when managing deer in urban areas and on the urban fringe. Nobody looking at this management model could say that it was not inclusive.

He said that roe deer particularly, although other species such as fallow and sika were relevant, were readily taking advantage of the habitat being created through for example the Central Scotland Green Network and new woodland plantings, with the increasing numbers of deer in close proximity to areas of high human population creating additional challenges by encroaching into gardens, golf courses and other recreational areas, and bringing an increased risk of road traffic accidents.

Against this background he said that the role of the Lowland Deer Network is to bring the diverse interests together and to promote collaboration and more effective joint working between them all as appropriate, both private sector and public. The main current focus of work is on local initiatives and many of the existing Groups having been holding training and 'taster' events. A new 'Deer on your doorstep' initiative, designed to engage the public with deer and deer management, will be launched as a pilot scheme in the south part of Edinburgh in 2015. Early thinking on deer management planning designed for lowland situations is also to receive attention.

The Minister, who has her office in Dumfries, asked in particular about the Deer Group in South West Scotland and Richard Cooke said that this had been the largest Group in Scotland but that it had recently been decided that its sheer geographical area made it ineffective and unwieldy.

It was now being restructured into three neighbouring sub-groups, all with strong, positive leadership, but with a commitment to maintain regular communication over the original area.

Barriers to effective deer management in the lowlands were also discussed, and it was agreed that the Local Authorities, with a small number of notable exceptions, were simply not sufficiently engaged in any form of deer management or did not realise that it was now within their remit to be so. Not only did some Local Authorities have a 'no culling' policy but also there was confusion over where any such responsibility should lie within Councils. There would be a new drive by LDNS with SNH to bring this issue to their attention.

It was evident that the Minister understood that deer management structures in upland and lowland areas were very different and that it would be problematic to impose the same regime across the board. That said, she is also aware of the issues and problems relating to increasing deer numbers in low ground areas, on the urban fringes, and on low ground Designated Sites, and that deer management planning in these areas requires a different approach.

Richard Cooke said that this was, as ever, a 'hearts and minds' exercise in order to galvanise action and that LDNS, which was funded predominantly by SNH, FCS and Transport Scotland, was working to bring all parties together to find solutions, to encourage the formation of new Lowland Deer Groups, and to raise awareness of deer issues and the need for management especially in areas where there was resistance.

The Land Reform consultation which closed on 10 February contains a number of proposals that will impact on deer management over the low ground, not least the proposal for increased powers for SNH, and it is crucial that LDNS is engaged in this process if only to express the difference in the way its members operate in contrast to their upland counterparts.



Richard Cooke with the Minister, Dr Aileen McLeod

Deer management 2015 - 2020 – What do we need to do?

Jessica Findlay, Wildlife Management Team, Scottish Natural Heritage

2014 Scotland's Wild Deer: A National Approach (WDNA)

'We manage wild deer to achieve the best combination of benefits for the economy, environment, people and communities for now and for future generations.'

This is Scotland's vision for wild deer as set out in *Scotland's Wild Deer: A National Approach* (WDNA). True perhaps, but it is useful to stop and think carefully about its message. WDNA is about showing how practitioners as well as agencies are practically delivering. It is relevant at a national and local level and puts deer right at the heart of benefits to people, nature and the economy.

WDNA shows how the deer sector will work together to manage deer for the benefit of Scotland. It was developed by people involved with and interested in deer. It is relevant to all of Scotland and all species of wild deer, from roe in city gardens to red on the high mountain tops. It forms the basis for the Code of Practice on Deer Management, setting out guidance for deer management responsibilities and sits alongside the Wild Deer Best Practice Guides.

In 2014, WDNA underwent an extensive review. Much was going on at the same time. The RACCE committee enquiry towards the end of 2013 resulted in the deer sector needing to show how they were delivering the public interest. More recently we have had the launch of the Land Reform Consultation. This has changed the context of WDNA but hasn't changed its overall vision. WDNA provides continuity in times of change. The 2014 Review involved many organisations including LDNS and ADMG. Healthy debates and discussions thrashed out the issues to identify common ground.

What is in the new 2014 WDNA?

The 2014 WDNA focuses on the next 5 years, looking ahead to 2020. It puts the spotlight on working together, ensuring a healthy environment and understanding people's perceptions of deer and their management, especially in urban settings. Other agreed priorities include contributing to targets for Scotland's native woodland, developing a range of options for low ground and urban deer management planning and many more. These are very real challenges.

What has been achieved so far?

Since the launch of WDNA in 2008, over 200 actions have been delivered by over 20 organisations, including LDNS and ADMG. Achievements include initiating an Eat Scottish Venison Day, looking after Scotland's protected natural heritage sites, publishing the Code of Practice on Deer Management, developing the capacity of Deer Management Groups and establishing the Lowland Deer Network Scotland.

Who will deliver 2014 WDNA?

WDNA is a vision for deer but it is also a vision for people. Everyone with an interest in and involvement with deer and their management will help deliver WDNA. To date a mixture of public and private bodies have worked together to carry out actions. All of these are co-ordinated through the WDNA Action Plans. A plan is drawn up each year, based on the WDNA priorities and objectives, showing what will be done and by who for the year ahead and ideas for actions for the following two years. Work has just started on pulling together the 2015 WDNA Action Plan. This is an opportunity to show the work that is going on in the deer sector and for you all to engage and demonstrate how you are contributing to WDNA.

Inverclyde and Dunbartonshire DMG seeks more members

Inverclyde and Dunbartonshire DMG is looking for individuals on the SNH Fit & Competent Register in their locality as they are seeking to grow their membership.

Following its official launch last year, Inverclyde and Dunbartonshire Deer Management Group (I & D DMG) as part of the Lowland Deer Network Scotland, is now looking to recruit. The Group meets every few months to discuss and address deer related issues within Inverclyde and Dunbartonshire. As well as developing the collective skills and experience of current members the DMG is actively involved in a local forestry deer management project. The Group is looking to put in place the necessary resources for other similar projects in the near future. Currently membership is drawn from both counties. Further afield the Group's members also actively undertake deer management throughout Argyll, Perthshire and North Ayrshire.

If you think this Group might be of interest, visit www.id-dmg.co.uk or email the DMG Secretary at contact@id-dmg.co.uk



Inverclyde. Photo: I&DDMG

Deer management in lowland forestry - a forest manager's perspective

David Bruce, Forest Manager, UPM Tilhill

In upland forestry the subject of deer management is well defined and understood where the management of red, sika, roe and fallow deer in an upland setting (with relatively low amounts of neighbouring land owners, low population densities, well developed deer management groups) makes the job of the forest manager relatively clear.

The general experience of the lowland forest manager is somewhat different:

- Land ownerships tend to be fragmented and it is not uncommon not to know the neighbouring land owner
- Linkages with neighbouring woodland (either broadleaved or conifer) are more common and present more opportunities for deer movement
- Management of forests near to large populations present challenges in respect of public access impacting on practical deer management
- Varied nature of lowland land uses have the potential to influence deer populations and movement (such as agriculture) and also the deer management intensity exercised by neighbours for example.

Over the next 10 - 15 years Scottish forestry is entering a period of high timber production owing to the area of forests established in the late seventies and early eighties, which are now reaching maturity and subsequent associated harvesting and replanting.

As the level of forest management activity increases the issue of deer management is now coming increasingly to the fore. The small scale nature of the majority of lowland woodlands, the absence of grants for deer fencing of restock sites and a desire for woodland structures to contain an increase in species diversity to help mitigate against potential impacts of future climate, pests and pathogens presents a quandary to the lowland forest manager.

The diversification of the woodland structure is usually undertaken with species considered to be sensitive to deer browsing pressure including an increase in the overall coverage of broadleaves and the diversification with soft conifers such Scots pine, Norway spruce and Douglas fir, which can be difficult to establish without deer fencing.



As well as delivering a forest resource for future generations the forest manager is also tasked with the protection of native woodland sites and designated habitats. The public benefit derived from the work of the forest manager can best be achieved through the efficient and sound management of the deer population within any given woodland site.

The economic factors which guide productive forestry tend to look towards the highest yielding species for a given site coupled with relatively low levels of management intervention (weeding, tending and deer management) which can, in many circumstances, limit the potential to diversify the range of tree species. Conifers are generally limited to hardy Sitka spruce where deer populations generally exceed 6 deer/100ha. Broadleaves can be established in shelters that afford protection from deer, rabbits, hares and voles but present a significant cost outlay where the intention is to establish larger areas.

Where possible in UPM Tilhill managed woodlands, deer management occurs throughout the woodland rotation, by encouraging woodland owners to lease deer stalking on a sporting basis which helps to control the resident population at a low level, provides an opportunity to monitor deer numbers, and to inform future management decisions.

Stalking is tendered to a database of suitably competent individuals who possess certification and insurance. Stalking tenants provide cull data to the Tilhill Deer Manager on an annual basis and leases are reviewed on a regular basis in conjunction with the forest manager. When woodlands reach their felling age and subsequent restocking, deer populations are considered as a potential constraint to successful restocking and, where deer numbers cannot be adequately controlled by the sporting tenants, contract stalkers are employed to either replace or to augment the existing resource.

There is no denying that as the current period of woodland activity increases, the forestry industry in the lowland areas will rely upon collaboration between forest managers, owners and neighbours (coupled with a professional deer management resource in the form of sporting tenants and deer control contractors) to ensure the next rotation of lowland forestry gets off to the best of starts. This is likely to present opportunities for business or individuals to enter the deer management industry and capitalise upon the strong demand for venison products and the requirement for the control of deer populations.



Scotland's first urban deer photography competition

Many published photographs of deer show the majestic Monarch of the Glen silhouetted on a hillside or against a dramatic and romantic Scottish scene; others are of shy roe deer in woodland cover and farm fields. Increasingly though, our sightings of deer are much more frequent and more often much closer to home. It's part of our changing world. We have seen photographs of urban foxes and urban peregrines included in wildlife photography portfolios; now the challenge is on to capture the changing habits of deer and their increasing use of the green spaces within our towns and villages?

Not just for those with an immediate interest in deer, this competition is open to the wider public, and a great opportunity and excuse for everyone to get out and about and capture a little bit of the wild, possibly not too far from the back doorstep even. The subject matter should be wild deer but in an identifiably urban setting, whether it's a garden, local park, cemetery or even on the middle of a roundabout.

The first prize is the opportunity to take part in a day's helicopter count with the SNH Wildlife Operations Unit, and the runner up will win one full day of photography tuition from SNH photographer, Lorne Gill. In addition to this, pictures submitted may be selected to feature in SNH's specially created gallery or in one of its publications.

All entries should be submitted before the closing date of 1 April 2015 to:
URBANDEERPHOTOCOMP@snh.gov.uk

More information at:

<http://www.snh.gov.uk/enjoying-the-outdoors/deer-photo-competition/>



Lowland deer management on the urban fringe

A Scottish Land & Estates 'Walk & Talk' event with Buccleuch and Lowland Deer Network Scotland (LDNS) was held at Dalkeith Country Park in August 2014. This sharing of information event was designed to highlight issues relating to deer management on the urban fringe, as well as other issues in relation to low ground deer management.

Under the Wildlife & Natural Environment (Scotland) Act anyone with deer on their land now has a duty to manage them sustainably – this includes private and public landowners, local authorities, agencies, NGOs, farmers, developers and private householders.

The event comprised a number of short indoor presentations on Buccleuch's approach to management of the roe deer population over their 1000 acre country park at Dalkeith, woodland regeneration, interaction with the public (both deer and stalkers), wildlife crime, and deer as a tourism asset. Andy Wiseman, Woodlands Manager for Buccleuch Woodlands, spoke about Buccleuch's management of the Park and led the visit to a number of focus locations.

Richard Cooke, Chairman of LDNS, gave a short presentation on the purpose and work of the Lowland Deer Network, and Charlie Everett of the Police Scotland Wildlife Crime Unit spoke about wildlife crime on the urban fringe, and wildlife crime specifically in relation to deer.



Native Woodland Survey of Scotland should provide useful benchmark for deer managers to measure 'public interest' success

Much has been said at various meetings and in the media regarding the Native Woodlands Survey of Scotland undertaken by Forestry Commission Scotland and analysis of this study with particular reference to deer.

The Native Woodlands Survey of Scotland (NWSS) is a comprehensive study of native woodland based on surveys over several years. Published in 2014 it concluded that:

- The total area of native woods in Scotland was 319,000 ha (788,270 acres) equating to 4 per cent of the total land area of Scotland, and 22.6 percent of its total woodland cover.
- Over the last 40 years some 14 per cent of ancient woodlands have been lost, most of this in open, unenclosed upland areas.
- Natural regeneration is currently below the level needed to sustain active native woodland ecosystems.

Only 46 per cent of native woods are in satisfactory ecological condition. On a comparable basis, 54 per cent of native woodland designated sites as at June 2014 are in favourable condition (excluding recovering sites), a decrease of 5 per cent since 2010.

Deer impact through grazing and browsing, but the main degradation occurs when impacts of deer are too great for too long – preventing regeneration or planting, or diminishing the understory to species of inferior biodiversity such as grasses and mosses.

Herbivore browsing and grazing was cited as the biggest, most widespread current impact on the condition of native woods, and the NWSS showed that the most widespread herbivores present were deer. Whilst its methodology has subsequently been questioned, the study concluded that "at least 33 per cent of all native woodlands are in unsatisfactory condition due to herbivore impacts, and over most of this area (72 per cent) the presence of deer (as opposed to livestock, hares or rabbits) was recorded."

There was therefore a presumption that because deer were present they were responsible for the damage. Indeed, where no other source of damage could be confirmed then damage was attributed to deer.

Whatever the survey shows, its results do form a benchmark for assessing future damage by deer. However whilst approximately half of the woods fall in upland DMG areas, the remainder falls in lowland and agricultural areas where there is far less structured deer management control (outside of lowland deer group areas), and consequently a number of new challenges are apparent.



For non-designated native woods the target is to restore at least 15 per cent of degraded ecosystems by 2020, and the "Delivering Favourable Condition" programme aims to bring 80 per cent of all designated sites into favourable status by 2016. That figure currently stands at around 64 per cent.

There are clearly defined paths for improving designated sites such as guidance and support through SRDP with regulatory action as a last resort. For non-designated sites it is hoped that owners will be encouraged by support from the new SRDP and acceptance of actions in the new WDNA which sets a target of "ensuring 60 per cent of Scotland's native woodland is in satisfactory condition by 2020" to include designated and non-designated woodland. For deer managers, improvement in the condition of native woods ticks the box as a 'public interest' goal.

There are a number of issues for further consideration, for example improving the effectiveness of deer management where lowland deer groups (LDGs) provide only limited cover and there is a job here for the Lowland Deer Network. Also, reconsideration may need to be given to

deer fencing in order to enable woodland creation and regeneration in areas of high deer impact, and provision will be given in the SRDP for this.

There is an admission that the NWSS itself has limitations – for instance its definition of woodland excluded small, low density woodland areas, and did not always marry with previous estimates and definitions. SNH is also revisiting how woodland condition is assessed, and how it can better take into account other ecosystem changes – for example current tree health and disease concerns. Further consideration is also being given to allocation of off-take between species, taking into account not just overall grazing impacts, but also the variation of grazing across different species, and whether positive biodiversity benefits can be achieved through a less polarized approach.

The NWSS is undoubtedly a very thorough piece of work. Whilst it will prove useful in setting baselines and determining targets over areas where the DMG system operates it will be far more challenging to implement similar programmes in low ground areas where deer management is far more fragmented and where there is acknowledged to be an increasing population of roe deer partly because of new habitat creation - including new woodland.

FES Tender Process

FES is embarking on a framework tender exercise for some of its deer management contracts in south Scotland. The framework contract will be advertised on the internet in January/February along with the date of a bidders' briefing day. Any individual or Group wishing to tender for future FES work would need to register an interest and attend the bidders' briefing day.

Groups and members are advised to view these pages (link below) regularly for opportunities arising for deer management on the National Forest Estate in Scotland.

More information at:

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7nrlsa>



Photo: FCS

South Lanarkshire Deer Group raises charity funds



Cole Quarrell

Last year's Urban Deer Day organised by South Lanarkshire Deer Group at East Kilbride raised just short of £300 which was shared between two charities Max to Miami and Epilepsy Scotland.

SLDG Chairman David Quarrell's grandson Cole was born with epilepsy and has recently undergone an operation at Edinburgh's Royal Hospital for Sick Children. David's daughter Lisa is a fundraiser for epilepsy charities and, as you would expect, David is also very involved - so a big thank you from David, Lisa and Cole to everyone who took part in the day and contributed to the funds raised.

What's hot in health – Let's talk venison



Dick Playfair

A new report from the Food & Health Innovation Service, funded by Interface Food and Drink, gives yet more support to the increasing acceptability of venison and its place in a modern diet. It says that "the idea of naturalness and health are inextricably linked in consumers' minds" and of course venison fits with that perfectly: "venison is high in protein and low in fat – a combination which science is showing to be beneficial for weight management and which consumers are starting to recognize as healthy."

In his foreword to the report Julian Mellentin of New Nutrition Business says however that whilst venison is less familiar to consumers, its gamier flavour and texture can also be drawbacks, but these are not insurmountable.

The report goes into detail about the market and supply, and the current drive to expand deer farming in Scotland in order to meet the demands of a growing UK market and to have an additional 22,000 deer behind fences in Scotland by 2020. The Scottish wild red deer cull accounts for about two thirds of product going into the UK supply chain, but the balance is met by imports from New Zealand, Poland and Spain. There is an export market for roe, but the routes to market are far less structured.

The report identifies a number of market opportunities that, if addressed, would allow the venison market to expand still further.

Increasing UK production could substitute for imported product (however, the representative body, the Scottish Venison Partnership, has estimated that if sales continue to rise at ten per cent per annum, then imports will also need to increase as domestic product will still not be sufficient to service all requirements, even when the target figure is reached).

There are opportunities for the export of venison. The European market is mature, highly competitive and already receptive to roe venison. However it is price sensitive, and subsequently volatile. Other markets for venison are opening up, such as China, Korea, and potentially at some point the USA. However, whilst the UK market remains buoyant then export is possibly of secondary interest.

The major retailers are interested in venison with Sainsbury's, Asda and Tesco all expanding their venison ranges. At the 'value' end of the market, Aldi and Lidl are also engaged. Issues however lie with consistency of supply and volume, and the fragmented nature of the resource across lowland Scotland makes entry at this level difficult without some additional measures being put in place.

Further processing and ready meals provide real opportunities for game dealers and other businesses. The ready meals market grew by 7 – 8 per cent in 2013 and venison has an opportunity to take a stake in this market as it expands. Added value options should also be considered – smoked

products, jerky, bacon and even meat energy bars all potentially have an exciting future. The Scottish Venison Partnership is also considering doing work to review supply in the venison sector including the Lowland Deer Network area. There is an anomaly that the regions with the fastest increasing deer populations (i.e. roe) and requiring the most input in terms of management are also the most fragmented when it comes to landholdings and deer management responsibilities, as well as being under-resourced in areas such as shared chills. Before any form of steady and consistent supply can be achieved into the wider marketplace such aspects will require to be addressed. Whilst culling only to meet local or own demand is sound in that there is no wastage, it may not represent enough activity in the face of a growing roe population, and consideration and joined up thinking is probably overdue in establishing the best mechanisms to get roe venison in volume into the UK food chain.

The full report What's hot in health – Let's talk venison can be downloaded from: <http://www.foodhealthinnovation.com/media/45631/Whats-Hot-in-Health-Venison.pdf>



Venison butchery demonstration with Bruce Brymer

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