

Lowland Deer Network Scotland

7th AGM at Grangemouth - 17 April, 2018

Chairman's Annual Report 2017/18

Looking back over at what I had to say at the AGM last year there was a lot in the melting pot. That remains the case. There has been progress, but also new things coming onto the Agenda all the time.

LDNS continues to go forward and gain more recognition from Government and support from deer managers and landholders. We have had two full Committee Meetings and two of the new style evening events incorporating presentations on a particular specialist topic of interest, non-lead ammunition, and night vision equipment respectively for the two events, whilst also covering LDNS and deer sector business. We have also led or participated in a growing events programme and have supported events at local level. Dick will cover past and upcoming events in detail under item 7.

I would however particularly refer to the Parliamentary event held on 29 November last. This was organised by Linda Fabiani MSP and was attended and addressed by the Cabinet Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, with a number of other MSPs present, including Graham Dey the Convenor of the Environment Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. It was a really valuable opportunity to showcase LDNS to a Parliamentary audience and in particular to make the point that lowland deer management is not the same as the DMG model in the highlands, that lowland deer groups vary considerably, reflecting the different circumstances in which they operate and the different memberships, and that there are lots of different but effective approaches to the collaborative management of deer across all land uses in the lowlands.

I mentioned Linda Fabiani and would like to express my particular gratitude to her for taking a close personal interest in lowland deer matters. This emanated originally from her direct contact within her own constituency with the South Lanarkshire Deer Group but has extended well beyond that. In addition to sponsoring the Parliamentary event she was also helpful in canvassing a consensus for a representative practical deer manager candidate to join the newly formed Lowland Deer Panel.

On that subject, the Lowland Deer Panel, this has been launched as recently as January this year, much later than originally planned, but is now in place and has started working. Those appointed to the lowland deer panel include:

- Peter Watson as Chair. Peter is Director of the Deer Initiative in England
- Professor Steve Albon of the James Hutton Institute, very experienced in deer matters and for a while the scientific advisory representative on the ADMG Executive Committee
- Eirwen Hopwood of West Lothian Council
- Dr Jochen Langbein, an independent wildlife consultant with lifelong experience of deer matters and particular expertise on DVCs
- David Quarrell, Chair of the South Lanarkshire Deer Group, selected as I said earlier by discussion with other LDG representations co-ordinated by Linda

Fabiani. It is encouraging that the point has been taken that any deer management considerations must take on the practical stalker's perspective.

- Karen Ramoo who represents Scottish Land and Estates
- and Jane Rosegrant of Borders Forest Trust.

The Panel was set up by SNH on the instructions of the Cabinet Secretary. Its remit is: "to examine the complex issues related to deer management in the Scottish lowlands, to contribute to the Scottish Government's ongoing review of deer management across Scotland."

"The Panel's aim is to maximise the benefits of deer for people and ensure that their numbers do not have an impact on conservation, agriculture or road safety. They will consider the nature of deer impacts, the best way to manage deer, including how to work collaboratively, and the information needed to support deer management."

Rather surprisingly the Panel has been asked to report back to the Government by September of this year which seems to be a very short period to come to a view about the lowland deer sector about which much less is known than the highland deer sector, - just 6 months. I cannot help thinking that their work will just be an introduction to what may become an ongoing task.

The Panel has circulated a questionnaire to all interested parties to try and gain information on how lowland deer management is carried out and seek comments, opinions and views about where improvements can be made. **This is a really important consultation and I would urge all to complete the questionnaire**, which is anonymous if you wish it to be treated that way, but also to persuade friends and contacts to do the same. LDNS is not a representative body and will not therefore be making a submission as such but I have responded individually and Dick will be doing the same. The closing date for responses is 4 May so please put this at the top of your to-do list.

In my own submission to the Panel I have highlighted the need for **information**:

- We know little about overall populations
- annual cull returns to SNH fall far short of reaching all deer managers across the lowlands.
- We do not have a clear picture of what deer management is taking place, where and by who
- and we do not know how much venison is being produced or how it enters the market.

We have some information on all of these points but not enough to have a clear picture sufficient for the Government to consider what could be done to help deer management become more comprehensive and efficient. It should be possible to close many of the gaps as various Government agencies have databases of most, if not all, of those who can provide that information – SGRPID, SNH, FCS, Police Scotland, Regional Assessors, plus DMQ Ltd.

I have also said that, while lowland deer groups are valuable and, by bringing deer managers together, add real value, there is a lot of deer management across the lowlands, carried out by individuals without much formal collaboration and that is a perfectly valid approach in many circumstances.

I also made a suggestion which had been put to me which is that another collaborative approach would be to set up “larder groups”. This would be comprised of individual deer managers forming some sort of co-operative which could hopefully access Government funds to acquire land and build and operate larder and chill facilities in locations which would provide a more comprehensive infrastructure for deer management. To be viable this would need to be at a considerable scale. It would also contribute to food safety standards, which is a matter of rising concern, with much new attention being paid to the venison sector by Food Standards Scotland. Dick will report on the venison industry later so I will leave that for now.

As I say those are personal comments based on my own contacts and experience within the sector and are not representative of an LDNS position. It does not have a position and leaves it to its members to make their own representations. I strongly urge you to do so. 4 May deadline!

I must also mention the Deer Working Group, also set up by the Scottish Government. It focusses on the deer sector throughout Scotland, rather than focussing just on lowland deer matters as the Lowland Deer Panel is required to do. The role of the DWG is to make recommendations to Government, by the Spring of 2019, as to how the present system of deer management might be improved, having considered the statutory framework and past performance along with comparisons to other approaches in other countries. The DWG is chaired by Simon Pepper and includes Dr Andrew Barbour and Dr Jayne Glass with Robin Callendar as “Special Adviser”. I have been asked to act as “External Adviser” in a personal non-representative capacity and have so far attended one of their meetings as well as responding to questions and points when asked to do so.

It is no coincidence that this Group will report back to Government at the same time as SNH submits its next report on the performance of the whole deer sector prior to the 2019 Parliamentary deer review which presumably will include another close examination from the ECCLR Committee.

In summary, we are under close scrutiny at every level but it is good that the Scottish Government has clearly registered the importance of the lowland deer sector and wishes to gain a better understanding of how it operates in delivering the “public interest” – what is the “public interest”? - food safety, road safety, deer welfare, and sustainable environmental, economic and social impacts. The ECCLR Committee is paying close attention and may wish to make its mark by promoting change where it is necessary. If we want that change to be genuinely helpful, rather than just perhaps ill-judged intervention on the basis of insufficient knowledge, we really need to get involved and have input. As I said, and for the third time, please respond to the questionnaire individually so that the deer panel has a really good body of opinion and expert comment to draw on.

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/BLPS73Y> (google - “lowland deer panel”)

Another current matter of great interest is of course the reintroduction of sporting rates. We have that separately on the agenda for later in the meeting, the seventh item, and I will talk about that then.

I do not want to go on at too much more length as much of the other news will be covered later. Dick will report on venison, the events programme, deer on your

doorstep etc. SNH will report on the deer management pilot scheme which they are setting up in the Central Belt, as well as giving a general update, and we will of course deal with the formal parts of the AGM - elections and Annual Accounts.

I would end by saying that I feel we have continued to make progress evidenced by a number of new individual memberships and the formation of a couple of new LDGs with one or two more in the wings. I am aware that we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of the number of people involved in deer management but the word continues to spread and I believe that the credibility of LDNS as a neutral gathering point for all sorts of deer interests continues to rise.

I would still like to see more engagement from the local authorities and hope that SNH will follow up on their good local Authorities event held last spring, as promised. The Cabinet Secretary has been invited to attend that subject to dates and that would give it increasing impetus and encourage local authority Chief Executives to pay attention to their statutory legal responsibilities and to realise that there is a ready solution - many trained deer managers keen for access to more land and able to give a good service.

There is also more to do in terms of engaging with farming, crofting and forestry interests and in respect of the latter I have had preliminary discussions with Confor about either arranging a joint event or contributing to an event of theirs to raise the profile of deer management with the Forestry companies in particular.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of the Committee and those in the lowland deer groups who have continued to support LDNS and to press forward in their own localities in terms of training, new membership, organising events etc. Finally, and in particular, I would like to thank Dick Playfair who shoulders more and more of the load of LDNS with energy and expertise, I am very grateful to him personally in that my slice of the cake in terms of time dedicated to LDNS is slightly less than it was owing to the fact that he is taking on more and more.

And finally thank you all for coming and for your continuing support for LDNS.