

LOWLAND DEER NETWORK SCOTLAND

Chairman's Report for 2018/19 AGM

To summarise 2018/19 in broad terms - it has been a "business as usual" year to the extent that the Committee has met regularly and that there have been a number of local events and training days. There have still been rather less of these events than I had hoped and in particular it is disappointing that there has not been more use of the *Deer on your Doorstep* educational package.

As you will shortly see from the Annual Accounts our income is somewhat reduced as Forestry Commission Scotland, (now Scottish Forestry as of the beginning of April) is no longer able to commit to contributing funding although there was an unbudgeted ad hoc payment of £5,000 from FCS during the course of last year, targeted specifically at the holding of habitat impact assessment awareness events and these are still ongoing. This reduction in funding does constrain what we are able to do on the ground and is a concern going forward. If the Scottish Government thinks that LDNS is a good thing and can be helpful in furthering the public interest in deer, sufficient financial support needs to be delivered for us to do all that we potentially could do.

The Lowland Deer Panel Report is of course the big news currently and the precursor to the 2019 Parliamentary review of the deer sector. Many of you will have seen and read it. I am very pleased to welcome Peter Watson, Chair of the Lowland Deer Panel, who will talk us through it later in the meeting.

As I am standing down as Chairman perhaps I may be permitted to share a few personal thoughts on where we have come from since LDNS was formed in November 2011 and what may be the future role of the Network.

Firstly, let me emphasise again the word "network". LDNS was set up to bring together all interests in lowland deer management and to promote a collaborative approach. It is not in itself a representative organisation although its membership includes a number of representative organisations along with practising deer managers. My own view, confirmed in the survey organised by the Vice Chairman last year, is that we have been reasonably successful in bringing lowland deer interests together although there are some, notably farmers and local authorities, with whom we have not yet achieved a satisfactory level of engagement. LDNS has also had good contact with the 10 or so lowland deer groups and has supported quite a lot of good project work with them but there is more to do in reaching out to individual deer managers across lowland Scotland as many of those work alone and are not necessarily inclined to join groups or stalking syndicates. So, to be realistic, what we have achieved in terms of building and expanding a network is the visible tip of a fairly large iceberg, but it would be quite wrong to regard that in a negative sense as we have had a lot of interest and tremendous support from a wide range of groups and individuals many of whom continue to be actively involved and regular attenders at LDNS committee meetings.

The Lowland Deer Network was set up as a joint public sector/private sector initiative but, although largely funded by the public sector, it is emphatically not a public sector body. Indeed, our public sector colleagues were very clear when we reviewed the need for membership five years ago that LDNS should continue as a subscribing membership organisation under the voluntary principle. Although the subscription income is a small proportion of the whole it does signify the independence of LDNS

and it can perhaps be reasonably assumed that the continuing support from public funds confirms the perceived value of the Network to the Scottish Government, and to SNH in particular, in communicating with and working with the individuals who manage deer.

While the Lowland Deer Panel Report does not look particularly closely at LDNS it does suggest that there may be a role for a new body, perhaps with a remit extending beyond deer and with a role for – I quote - “some sort of national co-ordinating body focused on deer to share information within the sector”. The report thinks that LDNS might evolve into a slightly different role to fill this perceived gap. I would question whether LDNS could make that change without losing its independence - an essential element in the credibility of LDNS among deer management practitioners. So, my plea to the Lowland Deer Panel and to the Scottish Government when they consider the LDP report is that they recognise the value of LDNS retaining its independent status and its roots in the voluntary principle. The development of collaborative deer management in the Scottish lowlands needs to be a bottom up - not a top down - process and I believe that LDNS can be a useful platform to assist in the development of a more structured approach to lowland deer management so far as that may be desirable.

It would also be great if Government and others could get into the way of not always referring to deer as a “problem”. Like everything else they have the potential to be either asset or liability and we need a more balanced view of their role in nature and in our lives and to manage them accordingly.

One success which LDNS can claim to have achieved is the recognition at Government level, and also emphasised in the LDP report, that lowland deer management is complex and entirely unsuited to a one-size-fits-all approach. It is very different from the management of large herds of red deer in the Highlands and a variety of different management approaches can be effective. All credit to the LDP for understanding and reinforcing this as a basis for a much more realistic conversation about what is possible, allowing sufficient flexibility for local solutions to local situations. I was pleased to note the Panel’s acknowledgement of the importance of collaboration in a range of different forms in managing lowland deer and to read among their concluding words that – I quote - “we would not recommend any approach that seeks to impose a rigid structure on what is a complex, heterogeneous environment, and we would wish SNH to continue to recognise the current multiplicity of approaches.”

There is also welcome recognition in the LDP report of what we have said repeatedly over the years, namely that developing a more comprehensive approach to lowland deer management is seriously constrained by the lack of information. Unlike in the red deer world we do not know what the lowland deer population is; we do not have a good overall feel for deer impacts on lowland land uses and habitats other than rather piecemeal information on deer vehicle collisions and impacts on forestry; we also do not have a good overview of the deer management resource – who the deer managers are, where they are, their level of expertise, and above all how many deer they cull. It is difficult to see how much progress can be made until, at the very least, we have a realistic understanding of the total annual cull. The agencies have the powers and means to obtain that information and I think that is the first nettle that needs to be grasped even if it meets with initial resistance in some quarters. With

my ADMG hat on the contrast between the level of information and analytical data in the open range red deer sector as opposed to the rest of Scotland is very marked.

To finish, I believe we have come a long way since 2011. Of course, there is much more to do in future but in LDNS we now have the mechanism and support from interested individuals and organisations to continue to make useful progress both to the benefit of deer managers and in the wider public interest. I am proud to have been associated with the Lowland Deer Network and am very grateful for the support that I have received and would wish you all well under a new Chairman who you will elect shortly.

Thank you.