Scottish Environment LINK

Managing deer for climate, communities and conservation

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This publication has been produced by Scottish Environment LINK - a range of organisations involved in land management, forestry, wildlife conservation, cultural heritage, community partnerships, nature education and outdoor recreation. Together, we have many hundreds of thousands of members and supporters.

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LINK is a Scottish Charity (SC000296) and a Scottish Company Limited by guarantee (SC250899). LINK is core funded by Membership Subscriptions and by grants from Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Government and Charitable Trusts.

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Cover and inside cover photographs: Red deer (Cervus elaphus) by Peter Cairns

Deer management in the 2020s

WE RECOGNISE THAT DEER have a vital part to play in a balanced ecosystem, and we believe that by managing their numbers strategically, we could bring about a wide raft of public benefits such as:

- increasing natural woodland cover to strengthen biodiversity, soak up carbon and reduce flooding
- diversifying and strengthening local economies in our most sparsely populated areas
- reducing tick numbers and road traffic accidents
- improving deer health and welfare
- opening up community access to hunting and venison.

The Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament have the power to make great strides forward in the way our land is managed. And that in turn can help us meet our climate change targets, expand and diversify our woodlands, bring back wildlife, enhance our landscapes, regenerate our most fragile rural areas, repopulate our glens and allow communities real influence over how their local landscapes are managed.

Here, we set out the case for bringing deer management into the 2020s, starting with a few simple steps such as:

- bringing in statutory regulation to ensure that deer densities are reduced to sustainable levels in every area
- phasing out public financial support for deer fencing
- broadening out participation in deer stalking to involve local communities.

PHOTOGRAPH: NATURAL WOODLAND OF SCOTS PINE PINUS SYLVESTRIS, BEINN EIGHE BY MARK HAMBLIN

Better deer management will increase natural woodland cover, soak up carbon and reduce flooding

Ten public benefits of a new approach

SCOTLAND'S DEER HAVE always been an important part of our cultural and natural heritage. However, for several centuries they have had no natural predators – so require human management. As a country, we have ambitious objectives to expand woodlands, improve biodiversity and reduce carbon emissions. But it will not be possible to achieve these unless deer numbers are reduced to a level that enables natural woodland regeneration to take place.

Unnaturally high deer densities come with significant ecological and economic costs to the country. Better regulation of deer management would hugely benefit Scotland's environment and rural economy. That means setting a clear target and timetable in each individual deer management group area to achieve the density needed to protect habitats and enable natural woodland regeneration to take place freely, without the need for fencing.

There are multiple public benefits of a different approach to deer management. Here we set out ten good reasons for change.

1 **More trees.** Reducing grazing pressures would help accelerate the spread of woodland – especially native and deciduous species – thus producing a cleaner, greener, healthier environment.

2 **Healthier peatlands.** Trampling and grazing dry out the soil, thus diminishing the ability of peat to absorb carbon and store greenhouse gases.

3 **More rural jobs.** Lower densities would require more stalkers. Drawing upon existing skills and expertise across the private, public and voluntary sectors, deer management could be expanded to include community models of hunting as widely practised in Europe, giving an economic and social boost to our most sparsely populated areas.

4 **Reduced rural inequality.** Getting more people involved at local level in planning and carrying out deer management could help ensure that revenues from stalking and venison are distributed more widely and fairly.

5 **Reduced need for fencing.** Deer fences are costly to taxpayers, visually intrusive, a barrier to public access and damaging to wildlife and habitats. Moreover, excluding deer from large areas of land increases their density and intensifies their impacts outside the fenced areas.

6 **Improved deer welfare.** Red deer, like roe deer, are naturally woodland animals and in Scotland they are stunted compared to their European counterparts. In harsh winters many starve to death on the bare hillsides. Lower densities and fewer fences would enable them access to their natural habitat.

7 **Safer rural roads.** SNH estimates there could be as many as 12,000 deer-related road accidents each year in Scotland – an average of over 30 a day – resulting in between 50 and 100 human injuries at a cost of many millions of pounds to insurance companies, the NHS and the emergency services.

8 **Fewer ticks.** Scientists say that it is "highly likely" that the abundance of ticks in our outdoor environments is associated with the rise in deer numbers over the past 50 years, and that in turn may have contributed to increasing incidences of Lyme Disease.

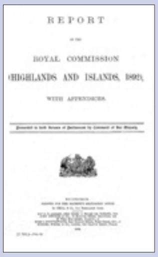
9 **A cut in greenhouse gases.** As well as damaging emerging woodlands and peatlands, Scotland's red deer alone produce 5,500 tonnes of methane each year – the equivalent of 137,500 tonnes of CO_2. A 20 per cent reduction in numbers would save the carbon equivalent of around 15 million car miles on Scotland's roads each year.

10 **A stronger venison industry.** Doubling the annual deer cull in Scotland would potentially double revenues from this nutritious, low-fat premium protein which is already worth millions to Scotland's rural economy.

History of the deer problem

1872 - 1954

Seven separate government-appointed inquiries take place over an 80-year period into the 'red deer problem'.

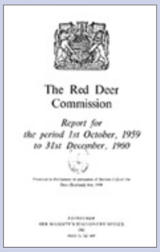


1959

Red Deer Commission set up, giving governments power to protect agriculture and forestry from deer damage. It estimates that numbers have reached **150,000**, and insists that "the root of all deer trouble is lack of adequate management."

1960 - 1965

Red deer numbers rise to **180,000** and the Red Deer Commission reports that "the use of land entirely or mainly for deer cannot be justified where only a proportion of the annual recruitment is culled and the balance left to die or spread onto adjacent land."

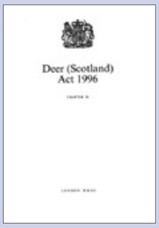


1989

"Thirty years on and no improvement" announces the Red Deer Commission Chairman. "Deer numbers now at **300,000**. If we cannot get the required cooperation from deer managers we will have no alternative but to seek a statutory solution to the problems."

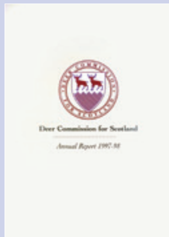
1996

The new Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 aims to tackle deer damage as part of the implementation in Scotland of the European Habitats Directive.



1998

Red Deer Commission is replaced by the Deer Commission Scotland to include oversight of roe, fallow and sika. Deer numbers continue to rise over the next decade and beyond.

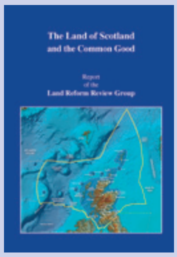


2010

Red deer numbers reach an all-time high of **400,000** and the Deer Commission is merged with SNH. The outgoing Chair of the Deer Commission says: "The current voluntary system has not evolved much in the last 20 years... if opportunities for reform are not taken then other approaches will need to be considered."

2014

A Land Reform Review Group report to the Scottish Government recommends: "Improvements should be made to the current statutory framework governing the hunting of deer in Scotland to ensure appropriate culls are carried out to adequately safeguard public interests."



2016

SNH report to the Scottish Government - *Deer Management in Scotland* - says: "We are not confident that present approaches to deer management will be effective in sustaining and improving the natural heritage in a reasonable timescale."

2017

Following a parliamentary debate, the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment insists that "further improvements are needed to minimise the costs of deer road vehicle collisions and replacing fencing, as well as reducing the environmental impact."

2019

A follow-up SNH report, *Assessing Progress in Deer Mangement*, says: "In the context of future challenges to land management, (we) recognise the ongoing pace of change required. We highlight the essential role that deer management needs to play in progressing and responding to these challenges.'

The economics of deer management

Could we do better?

In 2016, a report by the Association of Deer Management Groups stated that total direct expenditure on deer stalking in Scotland is £49 million and the entire sector directly supports 840 FTE jobs.

These figures are extraordinarily low considering that 26,000 square kilometres of Scotland's uplands are devoted primarily to commercial red deer stalking.

It stands in stark contrast to the economic and social benefits provided by land managed by environmental NGOs. The total land area owned or managed by environmental NGOs in 2013 was just 8 per cent of the land area of deer stalking estates.

Yet a report by the University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for Mountain Studies that same year found that:

- Landowning environmental NGOs directly employed 305 FTE staff directly related to their sites – 36 per cent of the number of FTE's directly employed by the entire commercial deer stalking sector and **five times** more per square kilometre.

- Landowning environmental NGOs directly spend £37 million on the sites they manage – 86 per cent of the total directly invested by deer stalking estates, and **10 times** more per square kilometre.

High deer densities maintained by many stalking estates also take their toll on the public purse through subsidies to fencing, damage to agriculture and forestry, and road accidents.

In 2016, SNH reported that "evidence gathered to date suggests that management of deer in Scotland results in a net monetary loss for both the private and public sectors".

Unleashing our potential

There is a different way forward. We could harness the skills and expertise of stalkers and land managers from all sectors to restore a healthier ecological balance in our uplands, unleashing a new sense of purpose and dynamism in some of our most fragile and neglected areas.

A new approach could become the catalyst for the launch of numerous small enterprises in many of our rural communities. By allowing mixed woodlands to spread and thrive, new business start-ups could take advantage of the availability of sustainable timber and other forest products, while nature-based tourism could start to flourish in areas currently off the beaten track.

Crucially, our vast upland landscapes have a vital role to play in meeting our climate and biodiversity targets. Each year, 12m tonnes of CO_2 are absorbed by Scotland's forests and woodlands – roughly equivalent to the annual emissions of every vehicle in Scotland.

To boost these numbers, the Scottish Government aims to increase woodland cover by 15,000 hectares a year by 2024. If done properly, with a healthy mix of native woodland alongside commercial forestry, this would also strengthen Scotland's biodiversity – the life-support system which enables all organisms, including humans, to survive.

But these woodland expansion targets can only be achieved either through a major reduction in deer numbers, or through extensive and expensive deer fencing, surrounding 1,500 square km of Scotland's landscapes at a cost of tens of millions of pounds over the next 15 years.

Deer management has serious economic, social and environmental consequences. Without change, it has the potential to block progress. With change, we can make great strides forward towards a better future.

Spreading the benefits more widely

For centuries, red deer stalking in Scotland has relied on paying clients and guests of private landowners, supplemented by professional stalkers. If cull targets are raised, that mix could change. In other parts of Europe, communities are more involved in deer control. In Norway, for example, over half a million people – almost ten per cent of the population – are registered hunters. Hunting on state land is considered a communal source of sustainable food, and local people have priority use. Game meat is an important part of Norwegian food culture, rather than a by-product of trophy hunting as is often the case here.

Private landowners in Norway are legally required to keep deer numbers to a level that doesn't compromise the public good, such as regeneration of woodlands. To this end, five-year 'harvest plans' are agreed with the local kommune (council) based on data held by a national deer register. After that, landowners are free to sell hunting permits on their own land in line with their harvest plan, and offer hunters financial incentives to hit the cull target.

Closer to home the community-owned North Harris Trust has opened up the practice of stalking, both for recreation and for responsible land management, to the wider community. Through the Harris Stalking Club, locals can participate and take on the responsibility for annual cull targets.

PHOTOGRAPH: ERLING SOLBERG

PHOTOGRAPH: NORTH HARRIS TRUST

The 2020s: time for change

The current system of deer management in Scotland is unique in Europe. In most other countries, deer hunting is closely integrated with other land uses, involves a larger number of recreational hunters, and is highly regulated – with culls set and monitored by local or national authorities to ensure the protection of the natural environment.

None of that applies in Scotland. There is no statutory regulation of numbers. In the absence of those natural predators that were previously wiped out by humans, it is effectively left to individual landowners to decide how many deer are culled, and who can or cannot participate in hunting.

Our 'deer forests' – which despite their name are notable for the stark absence of trees – have long been controversial, with many experts over many decades questioning the wisdom of devoting a huge proportion of our land mass to a single activity.

After generations of inaction from successive governments, there have been welcome signs in the past few years that the government is showing a willingness to face up to the need for change. If we act now, we could shape a modernised deer management system fit for the 21st century and start to build a brighter future for our natural environment and for our rural communities.