

Scottish Wildlife Trust

Briefing



Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform
Committee (ECCLR) Debate:

Deer Management in Scotland

Deer exert a significant influence on the vegetation of Scotland, with profound consequences for ecological processes and biodiversity. Where deer numbers are too high, effects of over grazing and trampling are a major threat to the health, natural functioning and connectivity of ecosystems. Ultimately Scotland's biodiversity is at risk.

When deer numbers exceed the ecological carrying capacity of the land, the damage caused includes¹:

- suppression of tree and shrub regeneration
- eradication of tall herb communities
- conversion of moss heath and dwarf-shrub heath towards grassland composition
- locally severe physical poaching of mires, fens and flushes
- loss of species' diversity in the ground layer of many habitats including woodland and species rich grassland
- increased rates of soil erosion, particularly on blanket mires
- damage to trees from browsing and bark stripping
- loss of woodland grouse through deer fence strikes (indirect effect)
- habitat compartmentalisation and fragmentation resulting from the erection of deer enclosures (indirect effect)
- increased runoff rates, decreased water quality and increased downstream flooding risk

Without effective and sustainable deer management to control the four species of deer in Scotland, damage to Scotland's natural heritage will continue apace. Because some of the habitats and ecosystems affected are very slow to recover- such as peatlands, montane scrub, upland native broadleaved woodlands and ancient Caledonian pinewoods, action is needed now if Scotland is going to achieve its public interest targets regarding biodiversity (including creating a National Ecological Network), native woodland restoration and expansion, climate change and peatland restoration.

The arguments surrounding what constitutes effective and sustainable deer management are not new. Legislation to control deer, and amendments to it, have continued since the Deer Act in Scotland came into force in 1959.²

The most comprehensive report to date of deer management published by SNH at the end of 2016, shows that the present voluntary approach to deer management is not sustaining and improving the natural heritage. It concluded that "*while recent efforts by Deer Management Groups (DMG), supported by the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), have improved DMG performance and planning, the current, mixed level of commitment to joint action does not provide confidence that the implementation of*

¹ For the full list of references for each bullet point see Scottish Wildlife Trust's Wild deer policy available at: https://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/002_057_publications_policies_Wild_Deer_policy_August_2012_1346425925.pdf

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/40/contents/enacted>

these management plans will deliver the desired level of environmental enhancements, or wider public benefits, across Scotland.”

Because the pace of change in deer management to protect the public interest has not been adequate by some DMGs, who do not seem to follow the *voluntary* Code of Practice on Deer Management (which came into effect on 1 January 2012), the Trust whole heartedly supports the ECCLR committee’s recommendations regarding the way forward, and in our opinion what will be key to success includes:

“A deer management system that covers the whole of Scotland, that is based on a clear expression, and spatial articulation, of the public interest, particularly in relation to biodiversity and climate change, and that has been developed collaboratively. The important issues are the trends in local populations, the impacts of local populations and their management in relation to the objective for each area.”

(Recommendation in Section 319 of report)

The Trust believes the best way to express and determine the public interest is to use the tools that already exist such as regional /catchment scale implementation of the Land Use Strategy to determine opportunities/constraints and the best way to deliver multiple land use objectives. This should be supported at the local scale, by herbivore impact assessments to determine appropriate cull targets to deliver the public interest and land use objectives. Information on deer management should be publically available - which accords with the policy intentions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.

Without this step change in approach as outlined in Section 319 of the ECCLR report, it will be impossible for SNH *“to determine the cull levels required in the public interest in each of these areas”* (recommendation in Section 323 of ECCLR report). And, where cull targets are not being achieved, Scottish Natural Heritage should be empowered to require that culls are undertaken by a third party.

The benefits from adopting this new approach include:

- Reduced grazing and browsing impacts, improving the condition of native woodlands, peatlands and other wetlands, and allowing expansion of native woodlands and montane scrub. This in turn will improve the capacity of land to provide a fuller range of ecosystem services including water regulation and carbon storage and sequestration.
- Larger, healthier deer, and continued economic activity from deerstalking.
- A better benefit to cost balance from deer management by reducing the costs of deer impacts, retaining the economic benefits from deerstalking, and securing additional benefits e.g. from improving the condition of habitats.
- Greater accountability, clarity and transparency in relation to deer management.

The Trust also agrees that a key requirement to realise this step change will be *“establishment of a short term working group to provide clear advice on the way forward for deer management in Scotland, reflecting the public interest”* (Recommendation in Section 322) and we support the terms of reference. The Trust would welcome the opportunity, if asked, to be part of the working group.

In conclusion, the Trust urges the Scottish Government to adopt the ECCLR’s recommendations without delay, as time is of the essence if we are to meet our international commitment to the 2020 Aichi Biodiversity Targets, as well as our own domestic Scottish Biodiversity Strategy which *inter alia* aims to: *“Protect and restore biodiversity on land and in our seas, and to support healthier ecosystems”*.

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April 2017