



Consultation Response

Deer Stakeholder Questionnaire

Scottish Wildlife Trust Response

September 2018

We recognise the importance of native deer as an integral part of Scotland's biodiversity, however, deer numbers need to be managed to a level that promotes natural functioning and health of the ecosystems at the landscape scale. We believe the deer management system needs statutory underpinning.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Deer Stakeholder Questionnaire. We have responded to the key questions posed below.

Key Points

- The Trust recognises native deer as keystone species of woodland habitats and an important component of Scotland's biodiversity.
- In the absence of natural predators the level of deer numbers has become one of the most pressing conservation issues in Scotland due to the wide range of negative impacts on Scotland's ecosystems.
- High deer numbers are a disproportionate cost to the public purse (e.g. forestry) and more generally to society (e.g. through runoff rates, decreased water quality and increased downstream flooding risk).
- It is essential that deer populations are brought to, and maintained at, a level which promotes the natural functioning and health of the ecosystems at the landscape scale.
- Deer management in Scotland should be underpinned by statutory processes including cull plans, empowerment to take action through a third party to achieve cull plans and information sharing.
- Deer management should be considered in the context of delivering multiple landuse objectives and Scotland's Land Use Strategy regional partnerships should be the mechanism for achieving this.

Questions

1. Which species of deer (roe, red, sika or fallow) occur in your area?

The Trust has a national remit with Reserves spread from the north-west highlands to Dumfries and Galloway in the southwest and eastwards across to the Lothians and Borders and Moray and Grampian area. We have experience of all four species of deer on our land holdings.

The Trust manages deer in line with the objectives set out in its **Wild Deer Policy**; specifically the objectives of:

- promoting the appreciation and enjoyment of deer by the public, and their use in education;
- maintaining deer populations at a level which promotes the natural functioning and health of the ecosystems of the reserve; and
- adopting the ecosystems approach and working proactively with neighbouring landowners and local communities to deliver effective deer management at the landscape scale.

2. What are the key positive impacts of deer in your area? These might for example include public enjoyment from seeing deer, tourism and local employment. How significant are these? Please explain why.

The Trust recognises native deer as keystone species of woodland habitats. Many visitors to our wildlife reserves appreciate being able to see deer and learn about the different species, their ecology impacts and benefits. These wildlife experience opportunities are supported through our visitor centres but people making recreational use of our wildlife reserves are also able to experience and appreciate seeing wild deer. Wild deer – especially native red and roe deer- are an important component of Scotland's biodiversity.

Under the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape initiative (led by the Trust) Culag Community Woodland Trust is leading outdoor education classes for local schools, ranging from pre-schools and nurseries to the high school. One of the projects focuses on the "Hill to Grill" programme for a second year. This programme was developed in conjunction with the Assynt Foundation, John Muir Trust, Highland Council Ranger Service and Ullapool High School. Pupils are taught by professional stalkers and learn tracking techniques, shown recently culled deer and learn butchering methods on the hill before having cooking sessions at the school. Initiatives such as these are important for reconnecting people with the value of natural resources and sustainable local food sources.

3. Have these positive impacts changed over the last five years, and if so, how?

There are undoubtedly more opportunities for people to see deer in their local communities now, including in and around towns and cities, due to the rise in numbers – this however needs balanced against the ecosystem impact caused by having too many deer (see 4 below).

There is also an increasing awareness that venison is a healthy meat and more interest in locally sourced food products. Programmes such as Scotland's Natural Larder help to promote these benefits.

4. What are the key negative impacts of deer in your area? These might for example include effects on agriculture, forestry or natural habitats, road traffic accidents or other impacts. How significant are these? Please explain why.

In many areas deer numbers are too high and this can lead to a wide range of negative impacts. In the absence of natural predators high deer numbers have become one of the most pressing conservation issues in Scotland. Herbivore impact assessments have tended to focus on protected areas and the impact of all four species outwith these protected areas has largely been neglected. Impacts include:

- 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.

Observations also indicate an increase in the likelihood of collisions and/or near misses with deer on roads both in upland and lowland settings. In lowland areas in particular this may be exacerbated by housing developments which push deer out from their available habitats.

5. Have these negative impacts changed over the last five years, and if so, how?

Yes. With increasing numbers of deer the impacts on the quality of ecosystems is increasing through both browsing and trampling of sensitive vegetation types (e.g. spring and flush habitats). These impacts, depending on the specific geography and interests of a location, can be either widespread

or localised in nature and will also vary seasonally. The nature of the impacts is more fully described in response to question 4 above. The Trust is particularly concerned with the extent of wider environmental degradation, beyond protected areas that can be caused by high deer numbers both in woodland and open ground settings.

6. Does any deer management happen in your area? If so, how is this carried out (eg. fencing, habitat management, culling or other methods)? Who does this (eg. stalkers, land managers, local communities, local authorities, public bodies, third sector bodies or others)?

The Trust undertakes deer control on a number of its wildlife reserves to bring densities to a level compatible with the habitat management objectives of the site. This deer management activity will be undertaken by a mix of our own local staff, stalking lets to neighbouring landowners or to contractors. The Trust does not permit sport shooting on its reserves except where we have to honour longstanding legal agreements, held by a third party, for shooting rights across the Reserve.

The venison taken from our Reserves is processed for the food markets, although on occasions, carcasses that are unsuitable for human consumption may be left on the hill as a food source for wildlife. The Trust's wild deer management therefore makes a contribution to local jobs and the economy although we have never attempted to scale the size of that contribution.

Natural regeneration of woodland without fencing is unlikely when deer densities are above 5 per km². The costs of deer management in Scotland are falling disproportionately on the public sector. The Forestry Commission Scotland underpins the national deer cull effort by carrying out 28-30% of the national cull (FCS National Forest Estate Deer Management Review 2013) on 9% of Scotland's land area at a cost of £5million per annum. When deer fencing costs are added in this figure is estimated to double.

The Trust has put in place and has to maintain deer fencing on some of our Reserves as a means of protect sensitive habitats where overgrazing and trampling is caused by too many deer. Deer fencing is costly to establish (estimate of £16/m) and to subsequently maintain to prevent breaches. This can have serious consequences for charitable budgets.

7. Do land owners and managers, or others, collaborate to do this? If so, how, and at what geographical scale?

The Trust is engaged with the Deer Management Groups in areas that are relevant to the location of our wildlife reserves – for example the Morvern Deer Management Group and the West Sutherland Deer Management Group. Through this process efforts are made to try to agree management objectives at the landscape scale but progress can be slow with competing interests within the Groups.

In lowland settings we have found the absence of lowland deer groups a problem to taking a landscape scale approach to deer management, for example in East Lothian. Scottish Natural Heritage does not appear to have the resources or wherewithal to facilitate bringing together landowners/managers at the landscape scale and instead hone in on protected sites in isolation of the wider picture. This needs to be addressed.

8. Do land owners and managers, or others, need to collaborate to do this in the future? If so, how, and at what geographical scale?

Through the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape initiative the Trust leads a project that supports the deer management planning activity in the area through gathering data to inform the plans, training land managers and investigating opportunities to create businesses from deer products. Deer Stalking Certificate Level 1 (DSC1) course was delivered to 10 crofters and estate workers in May 2017. ATV training was received by 4 estate workers and land managers and three land managers were supported to complete a professional module with the University of the Highlands & Islands in Sustainable Deer Management. Focusing on the coming year, a coordinator for training of Habitat Assessment for partners and local estates will support the DMG to achieve some of the SNH DMG Priority Assessment Criteria. Importantly this project has received support from the West Sutherland Deer Management Group and that has helped to unlock a funding contribution from Scottish Natural Heritage for a second year.

There is a case to be made for increased resources and capacity building in this way across Deer Management Groups in Scotland.

9. If a collaborative approach is not needed, what if any alternative would you like to see?

Not applicable – see comments in 8 above.

10. Are there any barriers to sustainable deer management in your area (eg. relative income versus costs of deer management, availability of stalking expertise, availability of venison markets, access to larder facilities or other barriers)?

See our response to Q8 above.

We would also like to see more resources allocated to developing local solutions for managing deer through the supply chain – from hill to plate – which develops skills and resources (ladders) in local areas and markets the end product in the local areas.

11. Is enough information available to support sustainable deer management in the lowlands (eg. relating to deer numbers, deer culls, venison markets, effects on agriculture, forestry and natural habitats, road traffic accidents or other information)? If not, what additional information is needed?

Information in the red deer range is improving through deer counts and the use of herbivore impact assessments. Information on the number of deer in lowland areas, at the landscape scale, is largely lacking making it difficult to undertake population modelling and to set deer management cull targets at the landscape scale. There is also a significant gap in the resources required to effectively create lowland deer management groups that would help facilitate a landscape scale approach – drawing on private, public and third sector interests.

Herbivore impact assessments are undertaken but are costly and need more support for the approach to be rolled out more widely.

12. Do the public's views influence the approach taken to lowland deer management in your area?

As a membership organisation we take member's views into consideration when developing our habitat and wildlife management objectives for wildlife reserves. However, our decisions are informed by evidence of deer numbers and impact assessments. When deer need to be controlled we use that as an opportunity to explain the context for an adaptive approach to wildlife management and the ecosystem based approach. We believe that public bodies/local authorities in particular have a leadership and education role to play in this regard.

13. What further action is needed in the context of the existing legislative and policy framework, and by whom?

The Trust's policy on deer management and proposals for funding of this are set out in our [Land Stewardship: a blueprint for Government policy](#) and would be underpinned by a statutory requirement to:

- Land managers to agree forward cull plans with SNH which reduce the impact on and improve habitat condition.
- Where cull plans are not achieved that SNH is empowered to require culls by employing a third party to achieve these.
- Information on deer management (plans, count information, cull plans and cull returns) should be publically available - which accords with the policy intentions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.

Scottish Government has an existing mechanism that it can develop to help support deer management but this needs to be activated – that is establishing regional land use partnerships under *Scotland's Land Use Strategy 2016 – 2021*. The Scottish Government had committed under Policy 7 in the Strategy to establish a limited life expert group to assist with developing guidance in relation to regional land use partnerships by the end of 2017. This work has not, to our knowledge, progressed. Time is now critical to establish an adequate support mechanism for regional land use partnerships which would incorporate deer management planning objectives.

At the local scale more support/funding needs to be given to assessing deer numbers at the landscape scale, to undertaking and interpreting herbivore impact assessments to determine appropriate cull targets to deliver the public interest and land use objectives.

Conclusion

Native deer are an important part of Scotland's biodiversity and Scotland's culture but, in the absence of natural predators, their numbers need to be managed to reduce their negative impact on ecosystem health and the wide range of public benefits that can be derived from these. A landscape scale approach which takes multiple land use objectives into account and is statutorily underpinned is required. Scotland's Land Use Strategy 2016-2021 provided an opportunity to establish the required regional land use partnerships and resources must be made available to take these forward and to deliver an ecosystem approach to land management.