



Wild Deer and Wildlife in Scotland

Scope of this policy

1. This policy (2007) covers Scottish Wildlife Trust's (SWT) views on the ecology and management of all species of wild deer in Scotland, and the role of SWT in issues relating to deer. It replaces the Scottish Wildlife Trust Policy on Deer (2002). This policy supports SWT's broader vision for Scotland's ecosystems where wild deer are a vital component of flourishing, ecologically functional landscapes.

Policy Statement

Overview

2. SWT believes that whilst light browsing and grazing by wild deer is generally beneficial to natural heritage, uncontrolled and excessive grazing by deer is currently one of the most significant threats to the health and natural functioning of ecosystems in Scotland, particularly in parts of the uplands. SWT therefore supports a range of deer management measures which should aim to stabilise deer numbers at ecologically acceptable levels. These levels should be linked to clearly defined ecological outcomes, as similar deer densities may have substantially different impacts on natural heritage in different areas or catchments
3. SWT believes that wild deer, very often in conjunction with sheep, have a significant influence on the vegetation dynamics, composition and physical structure of many of Scotland's priority habitat¹ types including woodlands, moorlands, fens, mires, grasslands and montane habitats. SWT believes the most significant of these are:
 - 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;
 - trampling of the nests of ground nesting birds;

¹ See www.ukbap.org.uk for a list of priority habitats in Scotland

Protecting Scotland's wildlife for the future

Headquarters: Cramond House, Cramond Gebe Road, Edinburgh EH4 6NS
• Tel: 0131 312 7765 • Fax 0131 312 8705 • Email: enquiries@swt.org.uk

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www.swt.org.uk

- loss of woodland grouse through deer fence strikes;
 - habitat compartmentalisation and fragmentation resulting from the erection of deer enclosures;
 - increased run off rates, decreased water quality and increased downstream flooding risk.
4. SWT notes that red deer populations have risen threefold in Scotland in the last 40 years and are likely to continue to rise without a strong policy lead from Government and its agencies to bring numbers down to ecologically acceptable levels. The most important policy change should be to simplify existing legislation to enable the Deer Commission Scotland to effectively intervene to control wild deer where they are causing damage to natural heritage without the need for expensive public enquiries.
 5. SWT believes the Government should provide the Deer Commission for Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage with sufficient resources and legislative powers to deliver ecologically acceptable populations of deer across the whole of Scotland. SWT also supports efforts between all relevant Government agencies (such as the Deer Inter-agency Liaison Group²) to strategically work together to tackle deer issues.

Deer management

6. SWT believes that management decisions involving wild deer must be made for geographic management units³ that make sense ecologically, but are also practicable enough to enable landowners to work together effectively. For each agreed management unit, a Deer Management Plan (DMP) containing a programme of management together with *explicit ecological outcomes* should be drawn up. If a given landowner does not adhere to the agreed programme of management in the DMP and damage to natural heritage is occurring then the Deer Commission Scotland (with Scottish Natural Heritage as appropriate) should make full use of their powers under section 8 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 (see also paragraph 4 above) to carry out necessary control measures which achieve agreed ecological outcomes.
7. SWT acknowledges that the exact methods and levels of deer management are likely to vary from one area to another. Deer management decisions should therefore be based on the best available scientific data.
8. SWT does not as a general principle support the use of deer fencing to protect natural heritage features but acknowledges that this may be the only option where special features are immediately threatened by deer. In the longer term, SWT believes the use of enclosures for deer should be phased out as Scotland moves towards deer population levels which enhance rather than degrade our natural heritage.
9. SWT believes that whilst designated sites⁴ often hold important features which might require more intensive or specific management, the primary objective must be to manage deer populations at ecologically acceptable levels at a *landscape scale*. This approach will not only minimise the need for ecologically damaging and expensive fencing, but will also increase the ecological connectedness of the designated site to the wider landscape.
10. SWT does not as a general principle support the winter feeding of deer but recognises that it may sometimes be a useful conservation management tool, for example by reducing browsing or grazing damage to an important habitat, although more research is required into this area⁵.
11. SWT is concerned about the impact on biodiversity and native deer populations of the increasing spread of exotic deer and indigenous/exotic hybrids, and supports effective and

² See http://www.dcs.gov.uk/joint_01.aspx

³ Some of these could be based on existing Deer Management Group areas, others may completely new.

⁴ Includes Site of Special Scientific Interest, National Nature Reserves, Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas.

⁵ R. J. Putman & W. Staines (2004) Supplementary winter feeding of wild red deer *Cervus elaphus* in Europe and North America: justifications, feeding practice and effectiveness. *Mammal Review* 34 (4), 285–306.

practical actions to limit further spread of exotic deer in Scotland, particularly sika deer but also muntjac, as this species remains a potential future threat.

12. SWT believes that an important driver for the continued rise in wild deer populations is the absence of large predators. We therefore support further research into the viability of large carnivore reintroductions into the Highlands, particularly the Eurasian lynx, as a cost effective management tool.
13. SWT supports the move towards a compulsory professional qualification for stalkers that tests not only competence in health and safety, animal welfare and carcass hygiene, but also a clear understanding of ecology and other wider issues relating to deer management. SWT also supports the use of the Deer Stalking Code of Practice⁶ to ensure the humane taking of deer and recommends this is kept under regular review.

Information on deer

14. SWT believes that as deer are a public resource, all information on deer management should be publicly available including cull and count data at landholding level. SWT accepts that the subject of deer management can be an emotive one and believes that, by making scientific evidence more readily available and understandable, more people will recognise the need for co-ordinated, humane deer management.
15. SWT supports continued funding for research into deer ecology, particularly in the areas of: deer as vectors for tick-borne disease; deer impacts on ecosystem functioning; and cumulative impacts of deer and sheep grazing. SWT would also be directly supportive of initiatives to communicate the results of academic research in a way which is clear, user-friendly and accessible to all stakeholders.

Socio-economic considerations

16. SWT acknowledges that deer have an important role in the economy of rural areas but believes that the primary objective for deer management must be to restore the natural functioning of Scotland's damaged ecosystems. We believe that reducing and maintaining deer numbers at ecologically acceptable levels across much of Scotland could actually increase revenues from stalking and improve the quality of the stalking experience in what will become an increasingly more attractive, wildlife-rich landscape. SWT also supports the development of new revenue streams associated with deer including deer watching for tourists ('deer safaris') and adding value to venison through innovative marketing.
17. SWT believes that as deer are a public resource there is a case for providing public money to help bring deer numbers down to ecologically acceptable levels. However, public money must be carefully targeted to ensure it is bringing additional benefit above and beyond the current status quo. SWT encourages the Government and its agencies to look at the full range of fiscal measures available and employ those which are most proven to buy additional public benefit. Financial instruments could include providing culling grants for areas under immediate threat, grants for the preparation of DMPs, financial penalties for failure to comply with deer objectives under cross compliance measures, or more general 'seed corn' investment in processing facilities and venison marketing. It should be noted, however, that financial inducements alone are unlikely to persuade some landowners to significantly reduce their deer numbers.
18. Whilst SWT advocates the lowering of deer numbers primarily due to the ecological damage they can cause, we also note that lower deer numbers would save both lives and resources by reducing the number of road accidents and possibly the incidence of tick-borne diseases occurring in humans, domestic livestock, wild mammals and birds, including economically important game birds.

⁶ See <http://www.basc.org.uk/content/stalkingpractice>

SWT strengths and priorities for action

SWT wildlife reserves

A number of SWT reserves contain wild deer, although detailed information is not always available. See Appendix 1 for further details. As a commitment the principle outlined in this Policy, SWT will undertake the following on its reserves:

- SWT will follow published best practice guidance on deer management on all reserves on which deer occur.
- SWT will promote the appreciation and enjoyment of deer by the public, and their use in education.
- SWT will endeavour to maintain deer populations at a level which promote the natural functioning and health of the ecosystems of any particular reserve.
- SWT will work proactively with neighbouring landowners and local communities to deliver effective deer management on its reserves and in the adjacent landscape.

Wider countryside

SWT believes that wildlife reserves and designated sites must be placed in the context of the wider countryside. Ecosystem-scale wildlife conservation, in conjunction with other measures, is vital to long-term sustainability and an essential step towards addressing some of the potential consequences of climate change. This means that measures to protect wildlife, including deer management, must now be delivered at a landscape scale, across ownership boundaries.

Links to other SWT policies

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following SWT policies

- Agriculture
- Killing Wild Animals
- Pest Control
- Non-native invasive species

References

Deer Commission for Scotland (2000) Wild Deer in Scotland – a Long Term Vision.

Deer Commission for Scotland (2001) Long Term Strategy.

Scottish Natural Heritage (1994) Red deer and the natural heritage. SNH policy document. SNH, Battleby.

Date of approval of policy by Council

Agreed by Council XXXXXXXX

Date that Policy needs to be reviewed

2010

Annex 1

Context

Wild deer in Scotland

There are four species of wild deer resident in Scotland. Two, the red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and the roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) are native; the sika deer (*Cervus nippon*) and the fallow deer (*Dama dama*) are introduced. Native species of wild deer are an important part of biodiversity in woodland, moorland and mountain ecosystems and are managed for a variety of economic, social and environmental objectives. Non-native species of wild deer are generally considered detrimental to land managing interests and sika/red hybrids a threat to the genetic purity of red deer. Under Scots law, wild deer are considered a common resource, belonging to no one until they are killed or captured. The right to shoot or live capture wild deer generally accompanies the ownership or occupation of the land.

Red deer, Britain's largest native land mammal, is distributed across much of Scotland's open hill range north of Perth. Red deer have existed in Scotland for at least the last 12,000 years. Significant populations are found west of Stirling in the areas of Argyll and the Trossachs and populations of red deer are located in the Galloway region of south-west Scotland. Total numbers of red deer in Scotland have been estimated to be in the region of 300,000-350,000 animals. Though it is widely accepted that the margin of error for these figures is high, even at lower levels this would be unsustainable. Despite some progress over the last decade or so, virtually all of Scotland is seeing an increase in red deer stags and red deer hinds have increased in most areas.

Native to Britain, roe deer are the most widely distributed species of deer in Scotland occurring in every 10 kilometre square with the exception of some of the islands. Given that they mostly occupy woodland habitats, counting or assessing numbers is difficult. Wide ranging estimates put the Scottish roe deer population at around 200,000-400,000 animals. Again, the margin of error for these figures is high, and many believe that the higher estimate is probably more accurate. As an elusive, solitary woodland animal, this species is particularly difficult to control.

Asian in origin, sika deer were introduced as an ornamental species to several locations in Scotland during the late 19th - early 20th centuries. All these introductions have now become feral and the sika distribution occupies around one third of the red deer range. Sika and red deer are genetically closely related and this overlap of range has led to hybridisation amongst both deer species. Sika deer are both robust and elusive, and their control is often difficult.

Fallow deer occur in isolated populations in several areas of Scotland. Numbers of fallow deer are not considered to exceed 8,000.

It is thought that muntjac deer may also be present in Scotland, although very little formal data is available. Muntjac deer are known to be very destructive of woodland ground flora and once they become established in an area, eradication is very difficult. The main danger at present is the possibility of captive animals escaping. As this species is particularly adept at finding a way out of an enclosure⁷, the only safeguard is to carefully regulate the keeping of this species.

Deer and land management in Scotland

Deer are an important part of the montane, moorland and woodland ecosystem of Scotland. Yet since humans eradicated species such as the wolf and the lynx, deer no longer have any natural predator and in many parts of the Scottish uplands red deer in particular are present at densities that impact negatively on habitat biodiversity. At inappropriate deer densities, woodland regeneration can be severely restricted, heather and other dwarf shrubs are lost from moorlands, flush and bog surfaces are disrupted by trampling, and plant species diversity and structural complexity is reduced, leading to a lack of resources for dependent species (e.g. invertebrates, lower plants and birds). Loss of tree and tall shrub cover in upper catchments of major river

⁷ 50% of captive populations in England have experienced escapes (DCS pers. comm.)

systems can reduce nutrient input, decrease invertebrate diversity and abundance, and accelerate erosion.

Privately owned sporting estates make up the majority of the land-use within the uplands and are traditionally valued in part by their annual sporting take of red deer. This often encourages the retention of deer populations above that which the land can support, in biodiversity terms, in order to boost the capital value. Deer often provide an important source of income to estate owners, and some direct and indirect employment in remote areas. Income is derived from the sale of venison and the letting of stalking rights for sport or for trophies. On some estates, deer, in particular red deer stags, are provided with discretionary woodland shelter and supplementary feeding over some of the winter period. Mineral supplements may also be supplied to hinds prior to calving.

So-called marauding deer on agricultural land may be shot by farmers and crofters, but this probably only has a minimal impact upon the population as a whole.

Roe deer generally occur within woodlands and are usually solitary and territorial by nature. Grazing and browsing by roe deer can put them into conflict with commercial foresters and garden owners near to woodland areas. Direct management is by sport stalking and culling. Indirect management is through fencing and individual tree guards. This species is widespread and can be particularly difficult to control due to its small size and habit of living within denser woodlands. In the absence of suitable predators, culling is usually confined to open spaces within or adjacent to woodlands that the deer are known to frequent.

Grazing pressure by deer can be exacerbated in tandem with other wild and domestic herbivores such as hares, rabbits and sheep. Until recent changes in the agricultural sector the deer ground in the Highlands supported over 3 million sheep. Deer range has also reduced as a result of the increase in commercial forestry.

Methods, other than sport stalking or culling, of protecting forestry and agriculture from damage by deer, in particular through fencing, can create pressure on other areas through displacement, can cause the death of woodland grouse and can hinder access for recreation. Live capture relies on securing a final destination for the deer, for example in a deer farm. In the absence of culling, not only are ecosystems damaged but also the deer themselves suffer as food sources become depleted.

Deer management has a number of socio economic factors relating to employment in remote rural areas for keepers and ghillies. Associated economic benefit arises from sporting estate expenditure, spend from both stalking clients and wildlife tourists and game dealers. Conversely, where larger-scale culling is needed to reduce deer populations to much lower, sustainable levels, deer management can actually have a cost rather than a financial benefit. The Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that in such cases financial compensation should be an option. However, substantial spend is also incurred through deer fencing and tree protection and there has been a steady increase in road traffic accidents attributable to deer. Deer management costs can therefore be offset at least in part by the reduction in these.

There is evidence that red deer in Scotland today are much smaller than their counterparts both historically and in other parts of the world. This has been attributed at least in part to unnaturally large populations that have to compete for food and are forced to roam further than usual to find sufficient nutrition. In the absence of large predators, the important process of natural selection has been lost to be replaced by the decisions of estate managers. However, value could be added to deer stalking if larger trophy animals became available. To achieve this level of improvement, continuous forest cover would have to be available so that the animals could be provided with shelter throughout the year. This would change the nature of the hunting experience somewhat, but would bring it more in line with other places such as parts of Europe, Scandinavia and Alaska for example where hunting is an integral part of the way of life. This in turn would further enhance the hunting experience and could add value for estates that rely on paying guests.

It has been claimed by some that reductions in deer numbers are responsible for the increase in tick numbers on the hills. As ticks carry Lyme disease and other illnesses that can be transmitted to humans, this is of concern. However, there appears to be little substance to this argument. Certainly sheep have been used as so-called "tick mops" whereby ticks attach themselves to the animals as they graze. The animals are then brought in and de-ticked to be released once more to continue their work. However, in the case of wild deer, the only way that this could be achieved is if the deer were medicated through chemicals added to supplementary feed. Though this might reduce tick numbers in the short term, it would affect the quality of the venison produced. In the absence of medication, large numbers of deer actually mean more ticks as they act as a host. Though other mammals such as mountain hare can play host to ticks, reduction in deer numbers should actually lead to a reduction in ticks (all things being equal). In addition to this, there is also a welfare issue in that although deer do not appear to fall ill from carrying large numbers of ticks, the irritation alone is probably significant and in large numbers ticks will inevitably affect deer vitality.

The deer management plan process should provide a rational, objective and collaborative means of deer management decision making. The deer management plan should take other land management objectives into account, including conservation and biodiversity. Cull targets should be based on deer densities, hind/stag ratios and biodiversity conditions on the deer range, and they should be met by using humane methods of killing deer. Stalkers should be professionally competent on issues to do with safety and welfare of stalking party, public safety and carcass hygiene. SWT believes that the best way to ensure this is for professional stalkers to demonstrate this through acquiring a suitable qualification. Management plans should provide a basis for monitoring the effectiveness of deer management and the achievements of a Deer Management Group (DMG). The plans should encourage forward planning in all aspects of deer management and build confidence amongst local stakeholders and the wider public in a systematic approach to the management of a shared deer population.

With a long history of traditional deer stalking it is unsurprising that, even in the light of a much clearer understanding of ecological principles, many still resist any form of interference or change. Thus views become polarised and progress is made difficult. To overcome this, sound scientific knowledge needs to be made available to all. It is important to understand that some will still be unprepared to accept facts, and not everyone working in deer management has access to the internet. However, information and education are vital in overcoming barriers that still remain to this day. One suggestion might be that education in such matters is built into a qualification that all professional stalkers must hold in order to demonstrate competence. Competence in this sense means not only health and safety, animal welfare and carcass hygiene, but also the demonstration of a deep understanding of the wider issues of deer management.

The Deer Commission for Scotland is the statutory body with responsibility for deer under the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996. It has the duty to 'further the conservation, control and sustainable management of deer' and, in doing so, to take account of: 'the size and density of the deer population and its impact on the natural heritage; the needs of agriculture and forestry; and the interests of owners and occupiers of land'. To be effective in this it requires the backing of sound legislation, sufficient financial support from government as well as government support for decisions and actions that have to be taken. The DCS also needs access to funds to allow compensation of estates that are required to undertake additional deer management over and above their normal activities.

Deer populations on SWT properties

The Trust properties whose habitat is significantly influenced by red deer are Ben More Coigach, Rahoy and Doire Donn.

Ben More Coigach

This estate falls within the West Sutherland Deer Management Group. There is no group deer management plan in place and there is resistance to this. A deer management plan is in preparation for the estate.

A significant number of the estates that make up the WSDMG are now owned by 'not for profit organizations' that wish to manage deer for conservation rather than traditional sport stalking objectives

Stalking rights are with SWT. This reserve is stalked by private arrangement. SWT receives the value of the venison and so a little income is generated. The cull is a traditional one to encourage the production of trophy stags, with a lesser emphasis on controlling hind numbers. The cull figures differ each year according to conditions but roughly 15 stags and 10 hinds are shot each year.

A very accurate helicopter count was made of deer numbers across the whole deer management group area in March 2006. 40 stags and 203 hinds and calves were recorded at Coigach giving a density of 4.2/sq km. This is at the lower end of the spectrum, with deer densities across the group ranging from 0.1/sq km to 33.8/sq km. The deer population on Coigach is stable and hefted, with some movement of stags between estates. The number of sheep across the estate has reduced in recent times and they are concentrated around the crofting townships, with only a few feral animals on the north side of the estate.

There is significant patchy tree regeneration on the north side of the estate indicating that grazing pressure is approaching a level that is satisfactory for woodland re-establishment. There are relatively few places where the ground is overgrazed or trampled due to grazing pressure.

In 1997 a very large crofter WGS scheme created a large enclosure around Beinn an Eoin. A compensation cull was carried out. The enclosure has altered deer movements and they are now commonly seen in the croft in-by areas and around the townships where they cause a nuisance. In 2007 a number of stags were shot under special license to prevent marauding.

The deer management plan will seek to reduce deer numbers to approximately 3/km sq by focusing more effort on hind culling, and will consider more community based methods of deer management.

Rahoy Hills

Rahoy Hills is in the Moverm Deer Management Group, and there is a group deer management plan in place. Traditionally Rahoy has been viewed as a deer sanctuary and so the 'deer management plan' has been to monitor numbers and effect but take no cull. The reserve committee has recently agreed to carry out a cull should there be justification for this.

Rahoy is a complex reserve. It is grazed by deer, cattle and sheep and the habitat is generally overgrazed. A number of enclosures have been created since the 1990's to exclude sheep and deer or just sheep, in an effort to regenerate the SAC woodlands and manage the SAC grasslands more precisely. Deer numbers are very dynamic with stags and hinds moving between Rahoy, Kinloch and Glencripisdale, and so it is misleading to give population numbers.

The SAC woodlands are overgrazed and incapable of regeneration without the exclusion of deer and sheep. The species rich grassland is also overgrazed if grazed by deer and sheep, but in a much better condition where only grazed by deer.

A project is in development to create further enclosures in the SAC woodlands, and to put infrastructure in place so that sheep and cattle grazing can be targeted in time and location. This may require some deer control, particularly in the woodland where winter deer shelter will be removed.

Doire Donn

This reserve falls within the Sunart Deer Management Group. Stalking rights remain with the landowner and therefore we have no deer management plan for the reserve.

Deer are regularly seen, particularly in the winter when the woodland reserve provides shelter for them.

The principal interest of the reserve is the atlantic oakwood. This is overgrazed by deer and there is no regeneration. One enclosure has been created and regeneration here is profuse. Red deer are therefore the reason that Doire Donn is in unfavourable condition and this can only be addressed by the construction of more enclosures. A further 20 ha enclosure is planned for the near future.