



About LINK

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 35 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests, with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

Briefing for Deer Management Debate

Summary

- We welcome the interest of the ECCLR Committee and its predecessor RACCE Committee in applying scrutiny to the issue of wild deer management, and in particular in prompting the production of the Review of Deer Management in Scotland (SNH 2016).
- LINK welcomes the ECCLR Report on Deer Management in Scotland of 3 April 2017, which provides a thorough assessment of the issues.
- LINK supports the ECCLR Report recommendations for improvements to the current system of deer management in Scotland, as well as the process suggested by ECCLR for consideration of next steps through a time limited working group with clear terms of reference.

Background – the SNH Deer management Review and ECCLR Report on Deer Management

1. The SNH Review correctly acknowledged the welcome efforts made in some parts of the country to improve Deer Management Planning throughout most Deer Management Groups. SNH also concluded in its Review that it could not be confident that present approaches would bring about any improvement in the natural heritage without significant further action.
2. The SNH Review highlighted that “available information suggested that if deer densities were lower across Scotland the benefits could be maintained and costs reduced leading to overall enhanced delivery of public benefits.” We fully subscribe to this view.
3. Importantly, both the SNH Review and ECCLR Report have helped to illustrate the inadequacies of the current regulatory system, for example:
 - Only three out of 11 voluntary Control Agreements¹ have met habitat targets;
 - SNH has not used its powers to follow up with compulsory control schemes².
 - SNH’s powers are limited to preventing damage, not restoring degraded habitats.
 - The overwhelming emphasis of effort is on red deer and statutorily designated sites for biodiversity.
 - Widespread impacts of all four deer species in the rest of the country, particularly in the lowlands, are largely neglected.
4. The result is continuing damage to the public interest, frustrating the delivery of Scottish Government targets for biodiversity, climate change and woodland expansion, as well as

¹ under S7 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996

² Under S8 of Deer (Scotland) Act 1996

imposing a heavy burden of public costs (e.g. in woodland fencing and deer-vehicle collisions on the roads), and major longer term opportunity costs related to forestry, carbon, flooding and river fisheries.

A failed framework of deer management

5. Without more effective powers and strong support from Ministers, SNH is not in a credible position to deliver Scottish Government's public policy objectives. Continuing to rely on a failed framework also sends confusing signals to land owners regarding the Scottish Government's commitment to these objectives.
6. Better regulation would bring Scotland in line with virtually every other European country, where deer managers deliver both the public and private interests.
7. It is important to note:
 - Over most of Scotland, owners of land are under no obligation to engage in deer management. 61% of the country is not covered by a Deer Management Group. Landowners in these areas have little interest or capacity to manage deer.
 - Progress to date is mainly in the form of improved Deer Management Plans – these have yet to deliver outcomes on the ground.
 - Pressure from the RACCE/ECCLR Committee has been a major factor in driving progress; there is justifiable doubt as to whether the improving trend can be sustained if this pressure is eased.
 - Although red deer numbers have stabilised, all other species of deer (roe, and introduced sika and fallow) are still extending their range.

Where do we go from here?

8. Significant progress has been achieved in two areas; both the detailed SNH Review and ECCLR Report have established the facts against which progress can be considered; and the Association of Deer Management Groups and SNH have also made progress in improving Deer Management Planning for red deer on the open hill.
9. While there has been progress across most of the upland range of red deer, we note that there are very few collaborative structures for deer management in most of lowland Scotland, and furthermore that many of the woodlands damaged by deer grazing pressure are in these areas.
10. When LINK gave evidence to ECCLR, we proposed that an important next stage to help further progress would be to address weaknesses in the regulatory regime across the country, as recommended in the Land Reform Review Group (LRRG) Report (2014)³.
11. The LRRG report proposed improvements "to encourage the voluntary approach to work more effectively and enable adequate culls to be carried out when it does not". In summary:
 - Require individual landowners to seek consent from SNH to confirm that their planned culls are environmentally and socially responsible, protecting public interests in their area;
 - Provide SNH with effective powers to ensure delivery of these culls where the owner is unable or unwilling to do so.

³ The Land of Scotland and the Common Good – Land Reform Review Group report 2014.

Section 32: Wild Deer. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/05/2852/298190>

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12. We believe a modernised system along these lines would also need, as the essential basis for decision-making, to:
 - Gather improved quality and coverage of deer management data;
 - Include all deer species, in all parts of the country;
 - Make this information easily accessible online to inform local discussions.
13. We believe these measures have the merit of being 'light touch' in terms of regulation, by retaining the voluntary principle, assisting the responsible efforts of deer managers and landowners, and enabling gradual change, with the prospect of net savings to the public purse.
14. We note that the ECCLR Report highlighted the lack of incentives for sustainable deer management and objectives throughout most of Scotland, particularly outside statutorily protected areas, and we believe that such incentives are essential to complement more effective enforcement of deer management.
15. While the ECCLR Report highlighted the lack of leadership by SNH in setting deer management objectives throughout most of Scotland, particularly outside statutorily protected areas, we note that this is a large task. SNH will require enhanced resources to undertake this role, and we therefore endorse the ECCLR Report recommendations in paragraphs 305 and 306 for a review of SNH resources to enable them to carry out these tasks.
16. The ECCLR Report agrees with the Land Reform Review Group (LRRG) report, and our suggested proposal, regarding a short term working group with clear terms of reference (ECCLR Report recommendations 151-153 and 323-325).
17. We also support ECCLR proposals for further consideration of a statutory code of sustainable deer management set out in recommendation 249, as well as a review of whether current deer legislation is fit for purpose suggested in recommendation 290. Following due consideration, the conclusion may be for better use of SNH's existing powers and/or relatively small changes to current legal powers for SNH to intervene in the public interest, where voluntary provisions are currently ineffective.

This Briefing is supported by the following organisations as LINK members;

RSPB Scotland
National Trust for Scotland
Ramblers Scotland
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Trees for Life
Woodland Trust Scotland

Whilst not a member of LINK, John Muir Trust, also supports this statement.

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