

PRESS RELEASE

29 January 2020

Contact: Alan McCombes **m:** 0771 744 2805

e: alan.mccombes@johnmuirtrust.org



Scottish
Environment
LINK

Environmental groups welcome Deer Working Group report as a potential catalyst to bring deer management into the 2020s

Scottish Environment LINK – a coalition of organisations involved in land and deer management, forestry, wildlife conservation, cultural heritage community, land partnerships, nature education and outdoor recreation – has welcomed the findings in the report published today by the independent Deer Working Group (DWG).

The independent expert body that was appointed by Scottish Ministers in 2017 has set out nearly a hundred recommendations in its 374-page report which if implemented in full, would go a long way to improving the ecological state of Scotland's uplands by changing the culture of deer management in Scotland.

Mike Daniels Head of Land Management at the John Muir Trust said: "First we want to praise the authors of this report – including the late Simon Pepper who chaired the Deer Working Group until his tragic death in 2018 – for their thoroughness and professionalism. We welcome the courage and clarity of the report which confirms that Scotland's existing deer management procedures and practices need major reform.

"If we were designing a new system of deer management today in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss and the depopulation of fragile rural areas it would bear little resemblance to the 'traditional sporting estate' model found in large parts of the Highlands."

Duncan Orr-Ewing, Chair of LINK Deer Task Force said "We welcome the publication today of this independent review of deer management in Scotland. We note and support proposals to update deer legislation to ensure modern and transparent systems of deer management, and proposed improvements to SNH powers to enable changes in practice on the ground. "

"The imperative for transforming of deer management laws and systems has been given increased impetus following the climate and nature emergencies announced recently by Scotland's First Minister, and in the context that excessive deer densities in many areas are preventing significant public policy outcomes from being achieved. These outcomes include woodland expansion; peatland protection and restoration as vital carbon stores; enhancing the condition of protected nature conservation sites; and reducing vehicle collisions and the spread of Lyme disease".

Charles Dundas, Chair of Scottish Environment LINK and Public Affairs Manager at Woodland Trust Scotland, said: "This report is a major step forward. We note especially the proposal to revise the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 which could open the door to transformative change and we would urge the Scottish Government to start working immediately to prepare for new legislation that could be introduced early in the next parliament."

Some of the key recommendations in the report include:

- An upper density limit of 10 red deer per square km over large areas of open range in the Highlands – with that figure to be reviewed from time to time to help meet public policy objectives including on climate change.

- That, following its series of assessments of Deer Management Groups between 2014 and 2019, SNH should now concentrate on ensuring high standards of deer management on the ground to minimise damage to the public interest.
- That SNH should adopt a more flexible approach to how deer are managed locally rather than rely too heavily on existing formal deer management groups (which tend to be dominated by the landowners whose prime objectives are sports shooting).
- That, instead of prioritising numerical deer counts on the open hill range, SNH should focus on building information about the impacts of deer on woodlands, forestry, agriculture, natural heritage and other public interests.
- That SNH should treat as a high priority the challenge of changing deer management in line with climate change mitigation objectives.
- That the Scottish Government should develop a 'cull approval system' – in other words stronger national regulation of deer numbers – and revise the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 to allow such a system to be introduced.

Scottish Environment LINK along with several other organisations including the community landowning North Harris Trust, the Forest Policy Group and Nourish Scotland recently published its own proposals to bring deer management into the 2020s in the publication *Managing Deer for Climate, Communities and Conservation*.