



A new approach to the Monarch of the Glen

Following on from Simon Pepper's Last Word in issue 48, Nicky Penford examines the current deer debate, highlighting the influence of the Scottish sporting estate and how things are so different elsewhere in Europe.

Reforesting Scotland has been active recently in the increasingly heated debate surrounding deer management in Scotland. Following our recent gathering in Alyth, we submitted a paper to the Scottish Government as part of its evidence gathering on the impact of deer on the natural heritage. The submissions by a range of conservation organisations ought to prompt a full-scale inquiry. The "deer issue" is of such significance to so many aspects of the Scottish environment and, unless tackled, will continue to be an insurmountable problem to effective woodland establishment and other ecological restoration. Unfortunately, there are entrenched and powerful vested

interests, experienced in peddling myths and misinformation, so progress will be hard.

It is striking that the main protagonists of maintaining artificially high numbers of deer are the sporting estates that dominate the Scottish landscape. In 2013, sporting estates were also in the press not only for their continued persecution of birds of prey, with a poisoned golden eagle the latest casualty^[1], but now also for the widespread slaughter of mountain hares due to the misguided view that this will control the tick-borne 'louping ill' virus that impacts on the intensively managed red grouse industry^[2]. Many sporting estates seem to be very good at killing many

of the wrong species of wildlife and not enough of the right ones, i.e. deer. Some enlightened estates are the exception to this and work very hard at the arduous task of deer control, but their task is compromised by the unwillingness of many other estates to follow suit. There is now overwhelming evidence for changes in the balance of interests favouring lower deer numbers, but many stalking estates continue to maintain high deer numbers for their stalking clients.

Fences and hurdles

A frequent argument from sporting estates is that woodlands should be protected by deer fences rather than by deer culling. This huge expense is often borne by the public purse in the form of forest grants, with the main cost of tree planting being not the cost of the trees, but the cost of protecting them from deer grazing. Deer fences are wrong on so many levels, ranging from preventing public access to causing the death of birds, such as capercaillie, that fly

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into them. Deer fencing produces an artificial environment, since woods need light grazing, not all or nothing. The evidence from high profile ecological restoration sites shows that in most cases, heavy culling at an estate level will be sufficient to reduce deer numbers to levels where tree regeneration can take place without fencing (as has occurred at Glen Feshie ^[3], Creag Meagaidh ^[4] and Abernethy ^[5] in the Highlands and at Carrifran ^[6] in the Borders).



The cost of deer fencing is one of many examples of the financial winners and losers, with the sporting estates gaining all the financial benefits of high deer numbers, whilst the public have to pick up the cost. These externalities, as economists call them, amount to a huge cost, ranging from the cost of road traffic accidents due to deer collisions, estimated at 7,000 per year in Scotland ^[7], to the loss of ecosystem services that could be provided by woodlands if they were allowed to establish - flood prevention, provision of habitats for salmon and trout, prevention of

Photo above left: Red deer stags at Glen Muick; Red deer herd, Glen Ey, Cairngorms. Deer are originally a woodland species but are forced to live in harsh upland environments where they can cause damage to fragile upland vegetation. Above right: Knock wood on Mar Estate – the area inside the fence shows the problem of deer fencing, with dense artificial growth inside and bowling green over grazing outside. This woodland is designated for capercaillie but habitats on both sides of the fence are now unsuitable due to over and under grazing by deer.

soil erosion and landslips, and water purification to name a few.

A major hurdle is the way sporting estates are valued. The image of the Monarch of the Glen and the Balmoralisation of Scotland means that the capital value of sporting estates is based on the availability of game, rather than land area, and stags are a highly valued sporting trophy. There are 340 sporting estates in the Highlands and Islands, covering 2.1 million hectares and accounting for 43 per cent of all privately owned rural land. This represents the largest concentration of land dedicated to game sport in western Europe ^[8].

Where forest has value

Having studied land use in several European countries, I am struck but just how bizarre and dysfunctional Scottish land management

is by comparison, and how often this goes unchallenged and is accepted as the norm. Hosted by the Latvian equivalent of the Forestry Commission, I travelled throughout Latvian forests without seeing a single deer fence or the ugly plastic tree tubes that are an integral and costly part of British forestry. When the Latvians want timber they just fell a small coupe, harvest the timber and within a short time young seedlings regenerate from surrounding trees and the cycle continues. Ironically, in some places a threat to young trees is not deer but capercaillie eating the shoots! Latvians are totally engaged with their forests, with many being small scale stalkers, licensed to take a sustainable harvest of deer, and most have freezers stocked with venison. Latvian stalkers provide accurate records to the state forest service on deer and predator numbers. If deer numbers start to rise, the number of licences given for deer is increased and those for predators such as wolves and lynx reduced to enable

the predators to control the deer. Given the health and diversity of Latvian forest wildlife, coupled with the importance of the forests to the local community, this system seems to work very well. The article by Hugh Chalmers on page 18 is an example of how deer stalking, undertaken by the local community, could work in the UK.

In Romania, I was out with a guide tracking bears, who excitedly pointed out two roe deer fleeing in the far distance through the forest. He could not understand why we were not excited. When I explained that deer can be ‘pests’ in our country and frequently raid my garden he was incredulous and said we were more likely to see a bear in Romania than a deer! Where deer and predators co-exist, deer live in a “landscape of fear”, with predators influencing their behaviour, keeping them away from many areas. This was clearly demonstrated when wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone national park. Not only did wolves keep the deer numbers down, but they moved them away from areas with high browsing impacts. With our depleted Scottish ecosystem lacking predators, humans must become the predators and reduce numbers, but whilst deer are the playthings of sporting estates this will not happen.

Responsibility

In Germany, licences are given to local people to shoot a quota of deer. If the quota is not reached and deer damage neighbouring farmland, those with the licence for that area have to compensate the farmer as they have not done their job properly! In contrast, I worked for 15 years as a farm adviser in the Eastern Cairngorms and met farmers who had to put up with deer from neighbouring estates devastating their valuable turnip crops through the winter. Many gave up growing turnips and had to import them from low ground farms at great expense.

Given that every other European country has an inclusive and sustainable approach to deer management, what arguments are there for not moving towards a European approach? The Scottish Gamekeepers’ Association (SGA) would argue that sporting estates

provide valuable employment; in fact, it could be argued that the sporting estate is the most powerful means of reducing rural employment yet devised. George Monbiot^[9] looked at SGA employment and revenue figures for a case study in Sutherland and concluded that “the Association’s figures suggest that the absentee owners and their monocultures of deer prevent not only the ecological regeneration of the region but also the economic regeneration”.

The stranglehold which sporting estates have on Scottish land use clearly demonstrates the failings of current regulation. The agenda of stalking estate owners should no longer be the dominant factor in a properly integrated approach to land management. Decisions on deer should be taken in the context of - and subordinate to - a much wider range of public interest considerations. Greater regulation and sanctions are needed. One proposal is to introduce a licensing system for sporting estates^[10], which could be revoked if it consistently

Photo: Red deer herd Garbh Coire: Part of a herd of 600 deer in Glen Clunie near Braemar where the head keeper famously said on BBC Countryfile, “red deer are nearly extinct in the Braemar area”.

failed to achieve cull targets. Licensing sporting estates has also been proposed as a means of tackling bird of prey persecution. All other industries in the UK are answerable to the public via democratic regulation and the ‘polluter pays’ principle. It is high time sporting estates were dragged into the 21st century.

Acknowledgement

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On the papers page of www.forestpolicygroup.org

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