



More venison, more trees?

The relationship between deer and woodlands cannot be discussed without considering wild venison. Crispin Hayes reports on some recent research.

Late last year, as part of the StarTree project, Reforesting Scotland (RS) did an initial scoping study of the venison supply chain in Scotland. As regular readers will know, StarTree is a pan-European project to support the sustainable exploitation of non-wood forest products for rural development. Arguably one such product is wild venison, the key product from exploiting the wild deer resource.

This preliminary research identified the various actors in the wild venison supply chain: the producers, processors, wholesalers, retailers, and indeed individual hunters. This gave some interesting insights, but we decided to leave it there for now. The proposed supply chain survey had been designed elsewhere in Europe for very different product groups. It involved a multi-page questionnaire, and asked for purchase and supply price information that most commercial producers would guard closely. It could be very useful for RS to engage with the venison sector, but this did not seem the best way to start. However, the findings make interesting reading.

Who's in the supply chain?

Starting at the sharp end, individual deer hunters are numerous. Holders of particular firearm categories would provide insight to total numbers of hunters, but for security reasons, the police are unwilling to release data. There are around 1,750 people on the 'fit and competent' person register held by SNH, which surprisingly does not have a formal training requirement. However, there is no obligation for individual hunters or stalkers even to be on the register. Most professional stalkers will be qualified to at least Level 1 of the Deer Stalking Certificate and will be conversant with the Good Practice Guide for deer stalkers. There are around 5,000 individual hunters of deer in Scotland, and despite the significant cost of recreational stalking, it is a rapidly growing rural activity. Leases to stalk roe and sika deer have doubled in quantity over the last few years and can now fetch as much as £200 per head.

Now looking at the producers group. It is unsurprisingly chiefly made up of rural estates, around 150 in all. Fairly good data is available including quantity and weights of deer shot

on individual estates. Estates are also required to make a statutory return to SNH in respect of national cull data. However, in terms of volume, Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) is the main player, producing around 65 per cent of wild venison in Scotland.

Turning to the processors, dealers and wholesalers. Venison dealers are required to be licensed by the local authority. A handful of local authorities were contacted, and all said they would require a Freedom of Information (FoI) request to release the data, which left us wondering why not just release the data anyway? However, the prospect of 32 FoIs seemed excessive. SNH also collect statutory returns from venison dealers but were unwilling to release these within our timeframes, citing data protection issues. So other data sources were sought. These showed that less than 20 businesses, one of which is in north Yorkshire, process most of Scotland's venison. Again, this part of the supply chain is dominated by a few players, and in particular Highland Game at Dundee who have a key contract with FCS, as well as other producers.

Finally, the retailers. Many independent butchers across Scotland stock wild venison (our research found more than 35) but perhaps of more relevance in terms of volume are the supermarkets. All now regularly stock Scottish wild venison, including the German discounters. That is a big change from the situation reported 15 years ago, when the sole supermarket to stock the product was Safeway. We should welcome that change.

Perceptions

It is worth considering the quality aspects of wild venison. These have improved greatly since the author last wrote on venison in *Reforestation Scotland* issue 23. The organisation, Scottish Quality Wild Venison, has done much to improve the value of the wild product, and in particular carcass handling procedures and recording for traceability and assurance purposes. This should be seen as a successful programme of education and training, resulting in added value to this rural resource. It is clear that improved quality has increased the presence of wild venison at the retail level.

From the evidence collected in this research, some of which is anecdotal, producer groups reject the notion that the red deer population is too high. The increase in recorded population is dismissed as being due to improved survey methods. So producer groups continue to maintain that the population is in balance. A further aspect is that demand for Scottish venison is outstripping supply. So the incentive is there to retain the wild breeding herd at its current size otherwise, they suggest, we will have to start farming deer in the Highlands. However, that may be a prospect that readers would be willing to consider.

It is clear that the agenda of organisations like the Association of Deer Management Groups and the Scottish Venison Partnership does not

entirely coincide with that of RS. And while their visions are quite different to those with a greater conservation focus, there is a need to accept that the former are key organisations and, therefore, there is benefit to engaging with them more closely. There is common territory and the benefit of having a fuller conversation with these bodies is that mutual understanding can be built, and this will lead to more inclusive decision making on rural estates.



Previous page: A highland pony carries home a deer from the hill. Above, top to bottom: Venison steaks; Venison and blue cheese.

Roe population explosion

Lowland deer are the big news story that has been building over recent years, but is yet to come into the awareness of the general public. A population explosion is in progress for lowland species and in particular roe deer. The Lowland Deer Network Scotland is working to raise awareness with landowners in order to try and address the issue. It will require a much greater effort by farmers and land managers in the wooded lowlands. Should RS members be concerned about lowland deer? Probably yes; there may be a significant long-term effect on lowland woodland. For example, all small tree plantations in lowland

Scotland need to be deer-fenced or have trees protected individually, which is not only a significant expense, but also an impediment to other wildlife. As with the highlands, there remain no significant predators apart from humans,

So could venison (as a proxy for predation) play a role? Perhaps, as it could help offset the costs of culling. But, as previously argued, a democratisation of deer hunting through reforms to legislation and firearms licensing has a role to play. If numbers of lowland deer continue to increase, so deer-related road traffic accidents are likely to increase; and this could lead to land managers being required to take action. In that situation, it is possible that a democratisation of hunting would be in everyone's interest.

Back to the menu

So, to return to the question: is eating more Scottish wild venison helpful in achieving a reforested Scotland or does it inadvertently support the maintenance of deforested landscapes? In my opinion, for the red deer of the highlands it is difficult to determine at the moment. An increasing economic dependency on venison may repeat the economic dependency of head of stags for each estate, and so result in maintenance of the relatively high populations we see today. However, for the lowland roe, I think it is clear, we need to take action now to reduce numbers.

While regulation can play a role, an economic incentive is likely to be part of the solution. So let's add value to lowland roe deer, and get it on the menu.

We would like to acknowledge the cooperation of various actors in the venison supply chain in carrying out this research.

deer-management.co.uk
sqvw.co.uk
scottish-venison.info
ldns.org.uk

Dr Crispin W. Hayes is Principal Consultant at www.eco-consultancy.co.uk.