

The wrong way to dispose of deer carcasses – but we need to stop being squeamish

Description

I was warned before being sent some photos of deer carcasses from Kinveachy in the Cairngorms National Park so, if you at all sensitive or squeamish, either steel yourself or don't scroll down. The mass disposal of red deer carcasses, however, gets to the heart of our muddled relationship with the natural world and understanding why this is going on is the only way we are going to change it.

My recent post about the stink pit on the Glen Avon estate ([see here](#)), which featured photos hardly less gruesome, described some of the law and guidance on the disposal of dead wild animals. The pit at Kinveachy is not a stink pit, used by estates to attract and kill animals they class as vermin, it's a burial pit, located discretely off the old military road that runs over to Slugain:

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The best practice guidance on the disposal of the carcasses of deer states [\(see here\)](#):

“If a burial pit is used, fence the area, and cover each item/load with soil, so as to avoid access for flies/birds etc”.



The burial pit itself is not fenced off – it's in a large enclosure about 1km square – and “each load” has not been covered over with soil as required, although it is possible that it was the intention of Seafeld Estates to do so but snow intervened. Seafeld have done nothing illegal, however, because the Guidance is only that, guidance.



For anyone who is shocked, burial pits are a standard means of disease control or disposal of unwanted animals in our increasingly industrialised farming industry. A recent example was the 15 million mink slaughtered in Denmark which were then buried in mass graves .

At the same time mass graves can cause strong emotions, associated as they are for humans with plague, genocide and other atrocities.

The dumping – not burial – of deer carcasses with general estate rubbish is a challenge to the narrative that red deer are magnificent wild animals and hunting a “gentleman’s sport”. As someone who has been a vegan for 35 years, if I could bring myself to eat any meat it would be that of these truly free range animals – but not if they had been treated like those in the photos. There is a strong argument that in Scotland we need to develop a food and hunting ethic that avoids squeamishness but treats wild animals with respect within an understanding that nature is, by its very nature, “red in tooth and claw”.

So why is this happening?

Kinveachy comprises significant areas of Caledonian Pine Forest, a very special habitat, which was considerably reduced over the years through commercial forestry and overgrazing by deer, which prevented it regenerating naturally. It’s now part of a large native pine wood restoration project and Seafeld Estates has been doing the right thing by reducing the number of deer in the area down. The regeneration of the pinewood is creating habitat for other species and might help save the capercaillie, for which until recently Kinveachy was one of the last remaining strongholds.

When deer are culled, however, what we should be doing is ensuring their carcasses enter the food chain. One way to do this would be for people to eat more venison. Unfortunately, that is where the squeamishness comes in, eating industrially produced meat is generally viewed as more acceptable than eating wild animals. Demand for venison is generally low and demand has fallen even further during Covid-19 ([see here for position last July](#)). That has possibly been exacerbated even further by the challenges facing those trying to export food to the European Union. A likely explanation for the Kinveachy burial pit is there was no market for the deer in the photos.

Where there is a lack of human demand, however, the other option should be to leave the deer out in the open for other animals to eat. That would recycle all the nutrients the deer had taken from the land back in their lifetime back into the food chain and benefit species like the golden eagle, which survives much of the year on carrion. Again, the sensitivities of the public get in the way of this. When the John Muir Trust shot deer in Knoydart in 2016 and left the corpses in situ, it was met with a wave of outrage, stirred up the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) who claimed leaving carcasses on the hill was cruel.

The SGA were back at it again a week ago claiming the JMT had “butchered” deer in Glen Nevis ([see here](#)) and that “*conservation bodies leaving carcasses to rot in public cheapens an iconic species and sends a damaging message as efforts are being made to champion Scottish wild venison*”. The hypocrisy and misinformation is extreme. These are the same people who are quite happy to tolerate all sorts of wild animals being tossed into stink pits as bait to exterminate predators. Where predators aren’t persecuted, carcasses won’t rot, they will get eaten, just like those of deer that have died

naturally. Anyone who has watched a wildlife film about Africa will know all the other wildlife that benefits from the lion kill. Perhaps it is time for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to put webcams up by deer carcasses to show how they get fed into the food chain and which animals benefit?

The argument, however, becomes more complicated at Kinveachy which is at the centre of the Cairngorms Capercaillie project ([see here](#)). The project aims to save the capercaillie from extinction in Scotland for the third time. Sadly, the action plan for the local Carrbridge Capercaillie Conservation Strategy ([see here](#)) reports that only one capercaillie chick was raised at Kinveachy last year. The Capercaillie Project is using some of its £3m grant funding to enable Seafeld Estates to employ an extra gamekeeper ([see here](#)). What that tells you is persecution/control of species like foxes, which can predate on the nests of capercaillie, is a core part of the project and that the last thing it will want to do is risk increasing predator numbers by leaving them food in the form of dead deer. Another reason for the mass grave.

Two days ago Richard Baynes at the Ferret ([see here](#)) revealed that the number of deer shot in the last year has dropped 10% below target as a result of the Covid crisis. Current culling targets are insufficient to enable woodland expansion or to prevent deer damaging peat bogs, arguably the two most important measures we could take to tackle climate change and the nature emergency, so this is a serious setback. Given these circumstances, Seafeld Estates should be praised for continuing with their culls. Perhaps, given the collapse in the market and the plight of the capercaillie, for a temporary period killing deer and then burying them is the only feasible solution at Kinveachy?

If so, all the parties involved, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, NatureScot, Seafeld Estates and the Capercaillie Project should be open and honest about what they are doing and work to educate the public instead of trying to duck the issues. Were that done, Seafeld Estates would also be forced to follow the Best Practice Guidance and give the deer a decent burial – instead they risk giving conservation a bad name.

An ecological solution to the thorny conservation challenge of how to reduce deer numbers without increasing predators of capercaillie at Kinveachy might be to re-introduce the lynx. Its favourite food is roe deer, and it would help to keep the deer numbers down, helping the forest to regenerate. There is also evidence from Europe that lynx displace red foxes, not because they kill them but because the fox is wily enough to avoid areas with lynx. If people are not prepared to eat more venison, re-introducing this top predator might therefore help restore the forest and the capercaillie without anyone having to resort to burial pits.

Addendum – reply from Seafeld Estates

[I am very happy to publish this reply from Seafeld Estates in response to my post which I think is very helpful]

“The whole carcasses in the hole are deer that were unfit to enter the food chain – either through emaciation, or 2020 born calves of hinds that were culled. Carcasses were also recovered from the A9 as a result of road traffic accidents.

Over this winter and in particular the recent hard spell, 200+ carcasses have gone through the larder and into the food chain. Towards the tail end of the hind cull, the proportion of unfit carcasses has risen.

The other parts are legs and heads removed as deer are dressed in the larder and sent to game dealers.

The hole is evidence of diligent work culling deer to protect regeneration of young pinewoods.

One carcass per month is left on the hill for carrion.

Normal practice with the dead hole is to leave it open and utilise the activity of flies and insects over summer to assist the decomposition. One hole can be left open for 2 or 3 years in this way before being covered over.

The black bags are full of bloodied blue tissue paper from the larder. Bale net and wrap ironically are from hay bales fed to deer in the past few weeks for diversionary feeding deer off sensitive regeneration sites and to assist deer welfare while there was snow cover.

In the future the Estate will use barrels with resealable lids in the larder instead of black bags. They can be washed for re-use so that only biodegradable waste enters the dead hole."

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Covid-19
4. Deer
5. landed estates
6. wildlife persecution

Date Created

February 19, 2021

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