

Deer numbers, conservation and the Cairngorms National Park

Description

Today the Grampian Moorland Group have been mounting an online protest ([see here](#)) against the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)'s proposals to reduce the numbers of red deer in the National Park from around 11 to 5- 8 per square kilometre. The protest is backed by the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) ([see here](#)) and Scottish Land and Estates ([see here](#)), whose previous Chief Executive, Doug McAdam, is a Scottish Government appointment to the CNPA Board, and has been given coverage in media like the Daily Telegraph ([see here](#)).

The protesters are taking a scatter gun approach and have made a number of wild claims, such as that the CNPA plan threatens food security (how would producing more venison do that?). Here I will focus on three claims, that the CNPA's proposals:

- are contrary to the recommendations Deer Working Group which have been accepted by the Scottish Government;
- threaten rural employment; and
- are inhumane

The recommendation of the Deer Working Group and the Cairngorms National Park

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association claims that the recommendations of the Deer Working Group “were for a density of 10 deer per square km across Scotland”. This is not true.

What the report of the Deer Working Group ([see here](#)) actually stated was:

“The Working Group recommends that Scottish Natural Heritage should adopt 10 red deer per square kilometre as an upper limit [my emphasis] for acceptable densities of red deer over large areas of open range in the Highlands, and review that figure from time to time in the light of developments in public policies, including climate change measures.”

So, 10 deer per square kilometre was to be the absolute maximum. But the Deer Working Group also gave specific consideration to the numbers of red deer in the Cairngorms National Park and made a number of recommendations arising from that:

“The Working Group recommends that the Cairngorms National Park Authority and Scottish Natural Heritage should have a much greater focus on the need to improve the management of wild deer in the Cairngorms National Park, to reduce deer densities in many parts of the Park to protect and enhance the Park's biodiversity (paragraph 52).”

It went on to say that:

“the CNPA should then be prioritising the areas where the deer densities should be lower [than 10 per sq km] to improve habitats and their biodiversity. For example, ensuring that “deer densities are compatible with the need to allow woodland regeneration is a conservation priority” in the current CNP

Forest Strategy. That is generally recognised to require densities of five or less deer per square kilometre. [my emphasis].

In fact the evidence from Glen Feshie and Mar Lodge now suggests that woodland regeneration requires deer to be reduced to 2-3 per square kilometre. In setting a target of 5-8 deer per square kilometre across the National Park the draft Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP) does not even meet the recommendations of the Deer Working Group, that is how unradical it is. That is why, as I argued last year ([see here](#)), it will do almost nothing to address the climate and nature emergencies.

The explanation for this dire state of affairs is that the representatives of the sporting estates, like Doug McAdam, still effectively control what happens in the Cairngorms National Park. But, leaving nothing to chance, from time to time they encourage one of their front organisations to spread misinformation. Two of the arguments they use to do this are the impact on jobs and cruelty to animals.

The jobs argument

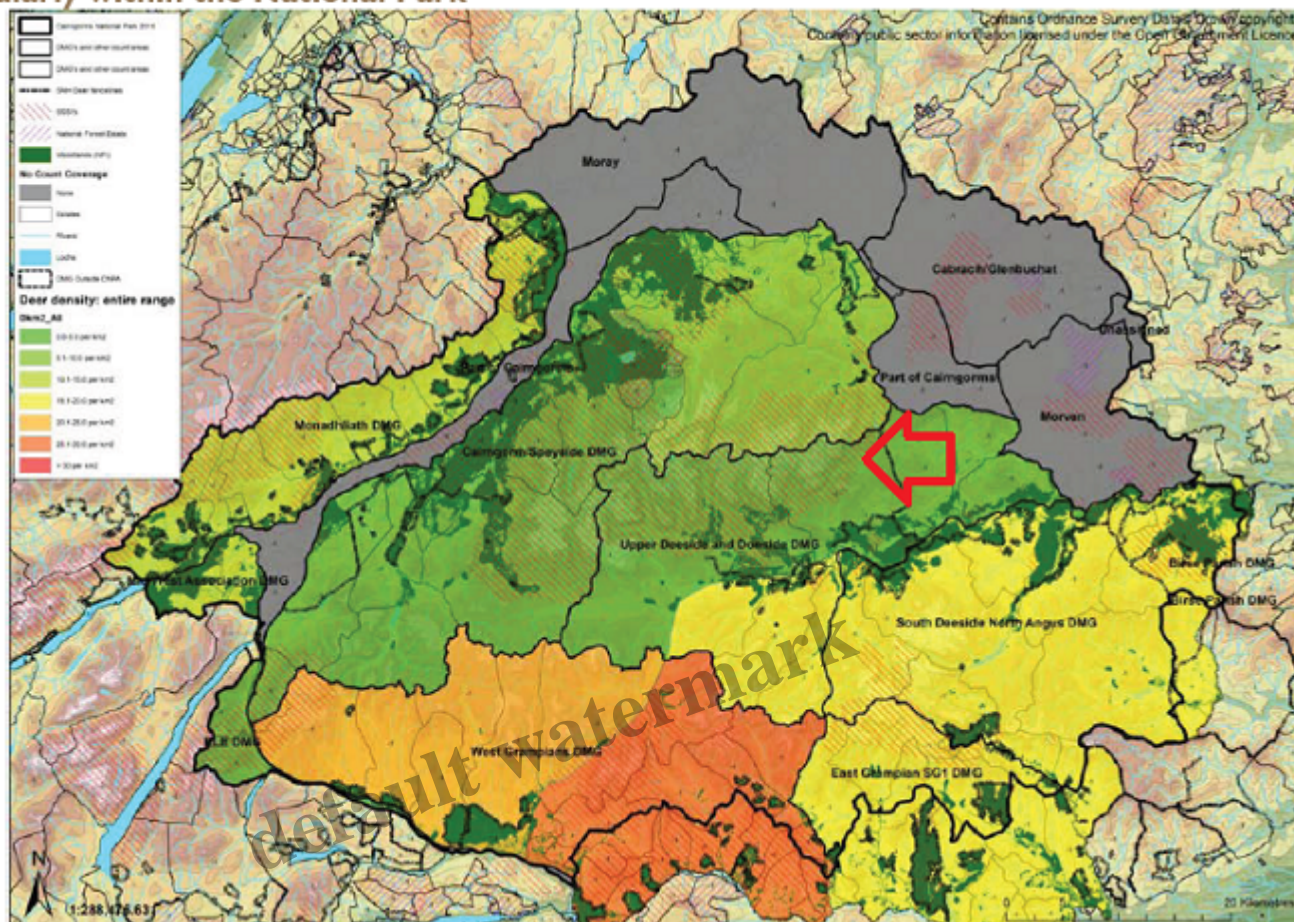
The Grampian Moorland Group have a Facebook page which reveals that on 8th April ([see here](#)) they took a local children's nursery on a visit to the Delnadamph Estate, owned by HRH Prince Charles. Like many other estates in the eastern Cairngorms managed for red grouse, Delnadamph has very low deer numbers. According to the last publicly available Deer Management Plan for the estate, which dates from 2017, ([see here](#)):

Deer Distribution and Movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Over the last few years, the erection of fences in the surrounding area has changed deer densities and movements on the Estate.There are no resident red deer hinds but a small group of stags on the Estate.Main deer movements are with Corndavon which was fenced off from the Homebeat of Invercauld in 2012.	No
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hinds and presumably no stalking jobs?

According to the deer density maps in the draft Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan that situation does not appear to have changed:

Map 1: Entire range mean wild red deer density polygons for the main areas counted regularly within the National Park



Red Arrow shows position of Delnadamph. The map also provides a graphic illustration of the serious deer problem in the southern part of the Cairngorms National Park.

. So why hasn't the Grampian Moorland Group, the SGA and Scottish Land and Estates been criticising the Royal Family for the very low numbers of red deer at Delnadamph?

The truth, when it comes to employment, is that historically the biggest single reason for rural depopulation in the Cairngorms has been the sporting estate, hence all the abandoned buildings over the National Park ([see here](#)). From from preserving rural jobs, game keeping has destroyed them – particularly jobs in agriculture – and continues to do so. Moreover, as game keeping grown more efficient (e.g. through the bulldozing of hill tracks and use of ATVs) fewer and fewer jobs are required.

Where the SGA is right is that industrial forestry practices create even fewer local jobs than game keeping. But that is not what the CNPA or anyone else is proposing for the Cairngorms. As Reforesting Scotland has shown for over 20 years, community access to and control over woodland has significant potential to create new jobs. The real challenge is that can only happen with land reform – an issue on which the CNPA's NPPP is silent – and if we tackle the sporting estates that exclude people from the land.

What the Grampian Moorland Group and SGA also ignore is the fact that MORE jobs will be needed to reduce deer numbers to levels where natural regeneration occur. That is likely to continue in the long-

term because deer stalking becomes more challenging when there are fewer deer and in a woodland setting rather than on the open hill. The evidence from Mar Lodge, as set out in Andrew Painting's excellent book "Regeneration" (see page 125) is that the demand for commercial stalking has not reduced because of the reduction in deer numbers there but on the contrary the quality of the stalking has improved.

The deer welfare argument

It is ironic that gamekeeping, a semi-profession dedicated to raising animals to shoot, now tries to promulgate the argument that reducing the numbers of red deer is somehow cruel. The SGA and others, however, know there is a receptive audience for portrayals of red deer as bambi, as in February when they got PETA to criticise BrewDog's plans to rewild Kinrara (about which more soon) ([see here](#)).

The truth is that traditional sporting estates employ gamekeepers to promote high numbers of red deer and game birds whatever the cost to other species. In the case of game birds, that requires the ruthless elimination of any species that might predate on them or effect their numbers. In the case of deer, the impact is indirect, as the high numbers destroy the habitats on which other species like the threatened capercaillie depend. We have a choice, very high numbers of red deer or the rest of nature. That is precisely why the Deer Working Group recommended that the CNPA needed to put far more emphasis on the need to reduce deer numbers to enhance biodiversity and why it recommended that powers contained in Section 10 of the Deer Scotland Act be amended *"to include damage, directly or indirectly, to the natural heritage"*.

What the SGA and their allies also never say is that reducing deer numbers and woodland restoration is the single most important thing we could do to improve deer welfare. With more food, the size of red deer increases, their fertility increases significantly and far fewer starve to death in winter.

What needs to happen?

A National Park worthy of the name would be calling out the arguments that the sporting estates and gamekeepers are making against the need to reduce the numbers of red deer in the National Park and its economic consequences. Unfortunately, the CNPA has played into the hands of these very same interests by proposing a deer density of 5-8 per sq km in the National Park, presumably in the mistaken belief it would somehow appease them. This potentially exposes conservation minded landowners, who are trying to reduce deer numbers to the 2-3 per sq km which will help address the climate and nature emergencies, to public criticism and makes their job harder.

There are some good people on the CNPA Board but I cannot see them sorting this out while the power of the sporting estate landowners remains. The solution to the problem is for the Minister responsible for National Parks, the Green MSP Lorna Slater, who is not afraid of courting publicity to make it very clear to the CNPA that she expects them to do more to tackle the nature and climate emergencies. She could give this process a kick start by removing the Scottish Government nominees who represent sporting estate interests from the National Park Board at the earliest opportunity.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
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