

Sustainable deer management only achievable with new legislation

Description



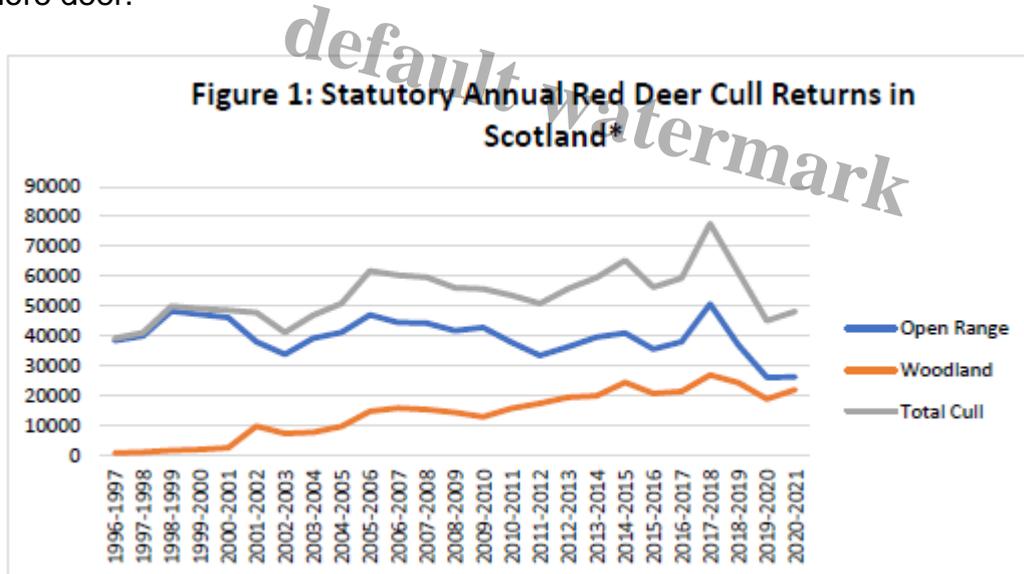
Deer in Glen Isla near the boundary of the Cairngorms National Park in April. The report of the Deer Working Group recommended that the Scottish Parliament should investigate why voluntary measures in this area had for years failed to reduce deer numbers. Photo credit Nick Kempe

Restoring Scotland's natural woodland cover and biodiversity from centuries of over grazing is an urgent and necessary step towards sustainable management and care for our hills and mountains. Woodland regeneration could, within decades, extend throughout the uplands allowing a natural woodland mosaic to develop, increasing biodiversity while protecting and enhancing the terrestrial carbon cycles. The most cost-effective way to achieve a natural transition from moorland to woodland at a landscape scale is through sustainable deer management [Cost-effectiveness analysis of woodland ecosystem restoration \(researchgate.net\)](#).

The current voluntary approach to deer management is clearly failing. On moorland and other open ground where native woodland expansion would have the greatest environmental benefit the total number of deer culled on the open hill has been declining over the last 20 years and in fact has never come close to the culling level required to reduce deer numbers and regenerate woodland cover (Figure 1). While some estates have been attempting to increase their cull levels, they are in the minority. For example, a recent study found that around 75% of sporting estates considered ownership of a sporting estate a "lifestyle choice" and wished their estate to be dedicated to sport shooting. The primary management aim on these estates is to maintain sufficiently high deer densities to support recreational stalking for the owner, his friends and elite clients [Conservation with a Gun: Understanding Landowner Attitudes to Deer Hunting in the Scottish Highlands \(researchgate.net\)](#). Needless to say

these owners consider woodland regeneration a “threat” to their “sport” and the investment value of their property.

The voluntary approach is, of course, fatally undermined by the perennial recalcitrance of the Scottish Government, via its agency NatureScot, to deploy the more powerful legislative tools at their disposal to ensure even the very modest deer culling targets set by Local Deer Management Groups are met. Recent legal amendments and measures currently being considered or approved such as altering the shooting season for deer and allowing enhanced technology to be used to locate deer are positive developments, but will only apply to the tiny minority of estates who wish to regenerate woodland on their property (or existing woodland owners). Even the introduction of direct financial incentives is unlikely to influence the management of sporting estates as their owners are wealthy and generally subsidise their sporting activities from other sources of income [Can Economic Incentives Resolve Conservation Conflict: The Case of Wild Deer Management and Habitat Conservation in the Scottish Highlands \(researchgate.net\)](#). In essence, woodland recovery at landscape scale is doomed to fail because too many estates pursue traditional sporting objectives and their owners resolutely refuse to cull more deer.



Data provided by NatureScot, December 2021

New Legislation is Required

In my view, it is now time to introduce new primary legislation that requires owners of all significant landholdings in Scotland to manage deer to achieve densities that would allow woodland to regenerate, recover and grow [New Deer Legislation required \(researchgate.net\)](#). While these culling targets could be negotiable locally to reflect circumstances, they would be legally binding. Landowners unwilling or unable to meet their legal culling target for different reasons (e.g. seasonal deer movement and/or availability of trained staff) would be able to lease out their quota to neighbouring estates, local community hunting clubs, and game dealers [Tradeable hunting obligations – A new approach to regulating red deer numbers in the Scottish Highlands? \(researchgate.net\)](#).

Deer Management Groups (DMGs) would continue to play an important role in establishing legal cull levels and would allocate quota based on ecological criteria. DMG membership should become more inclusive and representative of the wider range of stakeholders with an interest in deer to help reduce conflict and increase accountability. New members should include local community hunting groups, conservationists and scientists. Representatives of venison producers should also be encouraged to participate to ensure that deer management shifts focus from trophy hunting to venison production. Landowners unwilling to meet their required culling targets through direct shooting or leasing for 3 consecutive years would face stiff financial penalties and the threat of compulsory culling by NatureScot.

With many more deer being shot annually, there will also be additional economic benefits in terms of increased sales of wild venison, which could displace imported and farmed venison. There would also be wider social benefits in terms reduced road traffic deaths and injuries from deer collisions, the need for more professional stalkers and venison processors (all high skilled jobs) and, of course, new opportunities to shoot deer will encourage a new generation of "sustainable hunters" and local community hunting clubs to emerge who can benefit from access to deer stalking (e.g. outdoor exercise, fresh air and their own venison!)

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The author out while hind stalking a couple of years back

We already know that there is considerable latent demand for deer hunting that is only held back by the lack of opportunities to do so. While I recognise that there may be costs as well, for example in terms of additional labour and possibly a fall in land values as demand for traditional sporting estates ebbs away, these will be transitory due to land acquisition from “Green investors” and local communities.

While the decline of traditional deer stalking introduced will be mourned by some, there is little room for nostalgia or further government procrastination in the current crisis. We need to act now, and with courage, to recover our woodlands and demonstrate we are committed to a sustainable future in our wee corner of the planet.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. Deer
2. landed estates
3. NatureScot
4. Scottish Government

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