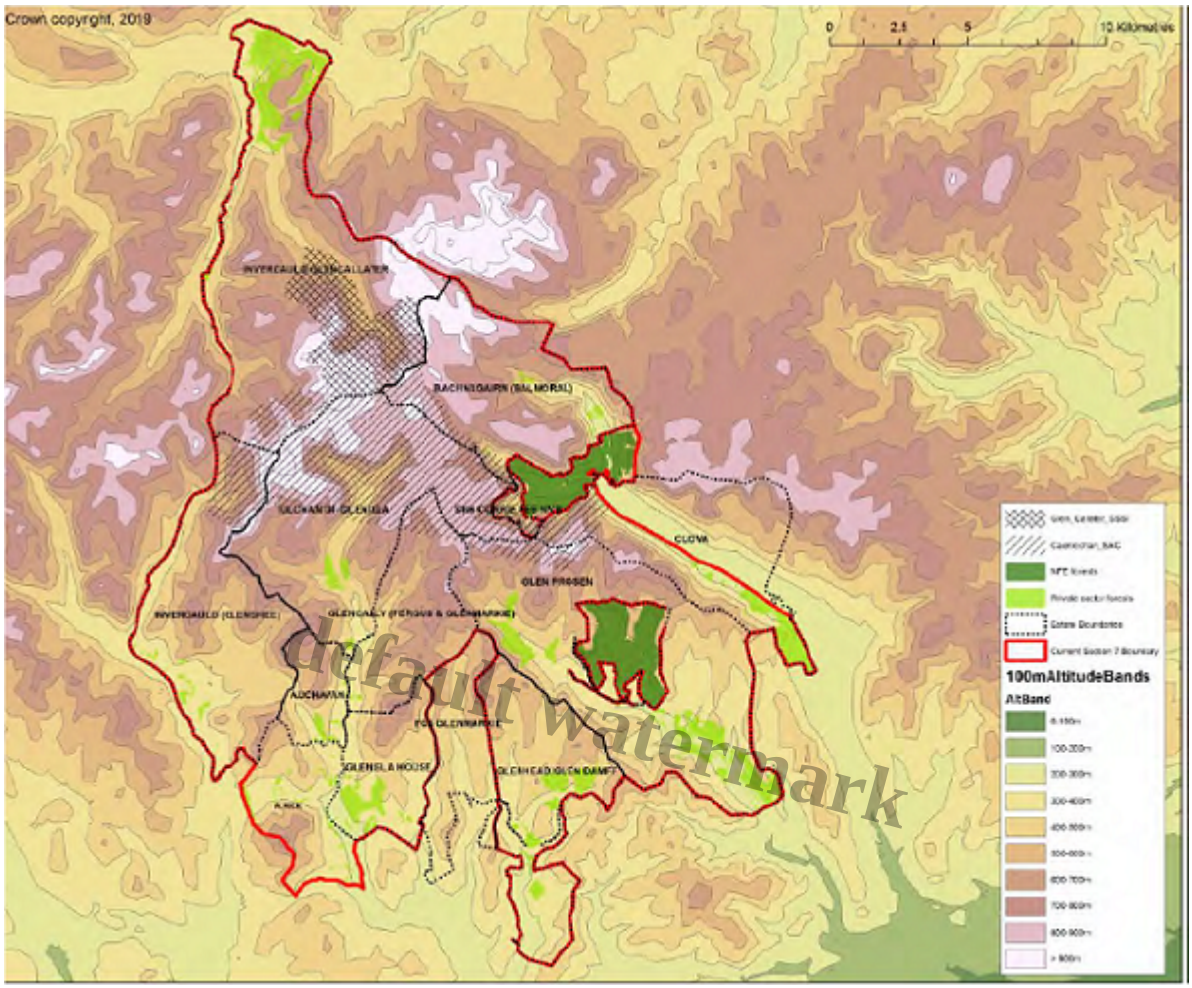
Deer density & the Cairngorms (1) â?? NatureScotâ??s target of 10 per sq km for Caenlochan

Description

Part of a herd of over 160 deer that appears to be within the Caenlochan Section 7 area on the boundary of the Cairngorms National Park April 2023

The 1996 Deer Act created a new duty for NatureScot, the body responsible for the control of deer in Scotland, to take account of â??the size and density of the deer populationâ?•.

The Report of the Scottish Governmentâ??s Deer Working Group, published in 2020 (see here), recommended that NatureScot â??*should adopt 10 red deer per square kilometre as an upper limit 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*â??. The Report also stated that *â??many habitats such as native woodlands and peatlands [require] densities well below 10 deer per square kilometre*â??.



Map of the old Section 7 agreement area which covered 34,144 ha. While I have been unable to find a map of the area covered by the new Section 7 agreement Nature Scotâ??s news release states it covers around 33,488 ha suggesting it covers much of the same ground

NatureScot, however, still clings to the figure of 10 deer per square kilometre as its benchmark for what is acceptable. On 23rd April it issued a news release (see here) stating its deer reduction targets had been met and claiming that in the area covered by the new Section 7 Caenlochan Agreement deer densities are on track to be reduced to 10 per square kilometre by 2026.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The implications of NatureScotâ??s 10 per square km target for deer at Caenlochan is that if you are

NatureScot first started using its powers under Section 7 of the Deer Act to try and persuade landowners at Caenlochan, who include the Royal Family, to reduce deer numbers at Caenlochan voluntarily 21 years ago in 2003 (see here for the saga). They then let the Section 7 agreement lapse, despite not having achieved itâ??s objectives, only to renew it after calls from the South Grampian Deer Management Group to do so. They and Tom Turnbull, the Chair of the Association of Deer Management Group (ADMG), are now claiming that attaining what the Deer Working Group stated should be â??the upper limit for acceptable densities of red deerâ?• in two years time should be counted as success.

Erosion of peat by deer trampling near Mid-hill, Monamenach is the hill background left. April 2023

The history of the Caenlochan Section 7 Agreements disproves Tom Turnbullâ??s claim that *â??It is clear that voluntary collaborative landscape scale deer management is workingâ?•*. It was because of their serious concerns about the failures of the Section 7 Agreements at Caenlochan that the Deer Working Group recommended the then Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee of the Scottish Parliament should conduct a short inquiry into what had gone wrong. That inquiry has never happened. It helps explain why the Scottish Governmentâ??s current proposals for reforming

deer legislation are so weak (see here and here).

Looking over Tulchan Lodge and up Glen Brighty to Glas Maol behind in the heart of the Section 7 Agreement Area. Caenlochan Glen, after which the former National Nature Reserve was named, is the glen on the right. Note the muirburn in the right foreground. April 2023

Most of the Caenlochan 7 Agreement and South Grampian Deer Management Group areas lie within the Cairngorms National Park. NatureScotâ??s news release fails to make any mention of the fact that the National Park Authority (CNPA) has adopted a target of 6-8 deer per square kilometre on open hill ground let alone how its own target of 10 per sq km fits with that. Whose side is NatureScot on, nature, other public authorities or sporting estate landowners?

Caenlochan was also once a National Nature Reserve, designated for its rare arctic-alpine plants, until most of these were eaten by red deer. Reducing deer density to 10 wonâ??t reverse that as NatureScot should know from its evidence to the Scottish Parliament in 2016 (see here):

129. The Committee explored SNH's view on whether there is an optimum deer d
and in oral evidence on 22 November Eileen Stuart from SNH said –

> "I do not think that there is some magic number that we are looking for...
> later stated "…a density of 4 to 5 deer per km2 …. is the sort of deer den
> look for if you want to establish trees without fencing." [37]

If trees wonâ??t grow until deer density is reduced to 5 per square kilometre â?? note this is below the CNPAâ??s lower limit of six deer per square km on the open hill! â?? there is no hope of more palatable plants doing so.

What is the basis for NatureScotâ??s density target of 10 deer per square km at Caenlochan?

The figure of 10 deer per square kilometre has been around for a fairly long time but I have been unable to establish where it first originated (help on this would be greatly appreciated!). It was, for example, adopted by the CNPA in their Park Plan for 2017-22 until they reduced it to 6-8 in their latest plan. The Deer Working Group appears to have accepted 10 as the upper limit for deer density on the open hill on the basis that there was very little scientific evidence from NatureScot on which to recommend any other target. NatureScot now claims (see here) that it is usings the figure of 10 per square kilometre because the Deer Working Group recommended it!

There thus appears no general scientific justification for the 10 per km figure (or indeed the CNPAâ??s 6-8 figure). The most likely explanations for why both have been adopted is that they are acceptable to most stalking estate landowners (particularly when they know NatureScot will undermine the CNPA). Those landowners want to retain high deer numbers partly because the sporting estate market has traditionally valued land by the numbers of stags found on it but also because the owners want to be able to â??stalkâ?• deer easily: a contradiction in terms, one might think, but for most stalking estates and their paying clients a day on the hill without a stag in the bag is unthinkable.

If you are to believe NatureScotâ??s figures (and the Deer Working Group generally didnâ??t), average deer density on the open hill in Scotland is now conveniently around 10 per square km. That, however, is far far more than was historically the case. NatureScotâ??s *â??most recent estimates suggest that there are up to 400,000 red deer on open ground and up to 105,000 in woodlandsâ?•*. The total is 40% more than were recorded in 1990 and probably over five times the number that existed in the 1950s when the great ecologist Frank Fraser Darling described much of upland Scotland as a devastated landscape.

Much of Caenlochan, moreover, is supposed to be protected as a Site of Scientific Interest, a Special Area of Conservation and a Special Protection Area. The Site Management Statement for the SSSI, which was last reviewed in 2020 (see here), contains no targets for deer density despite the fact the overgrazing and trampling by red deer was the main reason why the site was recorded as being in unfavourable condition. That should be enough to show that NatureScot is totally wrong to apply the 10

deer per square km â??upper limitâ?• to Caenlochan.

More hinds than you might first appreciate â?? I count 18 â?? on the descent from Finalty Hill to Tulchan Lodge

Last April I walked with a friend along the eastern edge of Glen Isla, from Badundun Hill to Finalty Hill and then back down the glen. That walk illustrated a number of further reasons why NatureScotâ??s new Section 7 Agreement with landowners to reduce deer to 10 per square km by 2026 is unjustifiable.

Caenlochan Glen to the right of Monega Hill.

The steep and craggy eastern face of Monega Hill comprises about 1 square km. Like the crags around Caenlochan Glen some of it is inaccessible and it is clearly incapable of supporting an average of 10 red deer for a year. This means that actual deer density in the areas available for browsing within the Section 7 Agreement area will still be significantly higher than 10 per square km if and when NatureScotâ??s targets are met.

Canness Glen with Carn of Claise behind and Caenlochan Glen on the left. Photo April 2023

The short growing season coupled with snow lie means there is very little food for deer for much of the year on the high plateau, which comprises the core of NatureScotâ??s Section 7 Agreement area. This serves to increase the average annual number of deer on the lower and more accessible still further. But when the deer do visit the higher ground over the summer and autumn months there are too many for the degraded vegetation to bear:

Peat erosion through trampling and grazing of vegetation

NatureScotâ??s deer density target for Caenlochan also appears to have completely ignored the need to consider the impact of deer not in isolation but alongside the impact of other forms of land-use, including other sporting uses that damage the natural environment:

Muirburn on descent to Tulchan Lodge, Monamenach behind

While muirburn removes older heather and promotes new more palatable growth, together with overgrazing it reduces plant diversity while increasing soil erosion and water run-off.

Muirburn accompanied by deer trampling increases the likelihood of peat becoming exposed and leaching carbon into the atmosphere.

What needs to happen

The case for a Committee of the Scottish Parliament to hold a short inquiry into NatureScotâ??s use of Section 7 agreements at Caenlochan is now even stronger than when the Report of the Deer Working Group recommended it in 2020. The Scottish Governmentâ??s response to that recommendation was it was up to the Scottish Parliament to do so. With the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee having been abolished, the recommendation appears to have become lost. It should now picked up by the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, who are now responsible for land-use, before the Scottish Government introduces any of its proposed amendments to deer legislation.

But what the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee could now also usefully do is to extend the inquiry so it also covers just how NatureScot became so wedded to a target deer density of 10 per square km.

The rest of this mini-series of posts will pick up on the Deer Working Groupâ??s recommendation (paragraph 52) that:

â??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 Parkâ??s biodiversityâ?•.

The posts will take a further look at the 10 per square km deer shibboleth, which has implications for the whole of Scotland, and how this is preventing nature from restoring itself through natural regeneration. I will use examples from around Braemar and Balmoral, where I was last weekend, to show what happens when deer densities are reduced to 2 per sq km or less and what happens when they are not.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. landed estates
5. natural environment
6. NatureScot

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