Royal Society of Edinburgh Inquiry into the Future of Scotland's Hill and Island Areas: Response by the Deer Commission for Scotland

The Deer Commission for Scotland is a non-departmental public body responsible to Scottish Ministers for advising on wild deer and regulating aspects of wild deer management. It operates according to the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996. DCS works in close collaboration with other government bodies and those involved in managing wild deer.

Wild deer are a significant environmental, economic and social asset to Scotland. Of the two native species, red deer occur in most of the hill and island areas of Scotland, while roe deer occur throughout Scotland largely in woodland habitats. Of the non-native species, sika populations are present in upland areas in the south, north and west, whereas fallow deer have a more limited distribution.

In considering the resources and issues associated with the hill and island areas of Scotland, wild deer are both a valuable resource and, by their interaction with other objectives, a management issue. They can impact on the natural heritage and other economic land uses both positively and negatively and it is these interactions that are a primary driver for their management.

In this context, and in response to the six questions identified in the RSE letter, the Deer Commission for Scotland offers the following comments.

1) **What would you perceive to be the main drivers of change and sources of income generation in upland and island areas of Scotland?**

DCS is currently developing a new strategy for wild deer in Scotland, in which the following have been identified as key drivers of change:

- Climate change- changes in climate and the resulting landscape may well affect the behaviour and health of deer populations and therefore their value as a resource and the management required. Responses to climate change are also likely to affect the broader rural economy as carbon efficiency becomes a key driver.
- Rural development policy- changes in agricultural and rural development policy are likely to result in changes in the numbers of grazing stock in upland areas, which in turn may affect the habitat condition, number or behaviour of wild deer present and the management required. Together with domestic stock, wild deer are a key influence on the condition of many upland habitats, particularly in relation to biodiversity targets.
- Tourism trends- deer stalking, a common feature of management approaches, is dependent on national and international tourism trends which are subject to a wide range of influences. Increasingly, there are new opportunities for tourism in upland areas (wildlife watching, eco-tourism etc) that will also be subject to broader market trends.
- Rural population profile- the skills profile of rural communities will continue to change, influencing the types of activities established and the availability of skills to continue existing management.
- Public perceptions- perceptions of land ownership, country sports, shooting, animal welfare, public access rights and other issues are likely to be a driver of change, both directly into public policy, but also into land management practice.

At present the key source of income in relation to wild deer is through stalking, whether let accompanied (as is traditional in upland areas for red deer) or unaccompanied (more common in roe deer stalking). The income derived from sporting lets and venison sales at present is such that most deer forests operate at a net loss .

2) **What are the attributes of social, cultural and economic value in Scotland's hill and island areas?**

DCS recognises wild deer as being a valuable social, cultural and economic asset, in addition to being an important component in Scotland's biodiversity. Red and roe deer were recently voted Scotland's most iconic species in a survey carried out as part of developing the Scottish Biodiversity List. The association of red deer in particular with Scotland's upland areas forms part of the cultural identity of highland Scotland. Wild deer often form a part of the identity of local communities in upland areas, and also a part of the national identity on which the tourism economy draws.

More widely, DCS recognises the skills and expertise in relation to deer management in hill and island areas, particularly among those involved in managing the natural resources of these areas. In many such areas employment opportunities are limited and multi-skilling and multiple (or seasonal) jobs are characteristic.

Deer management currently supports significant employment in often remote areas and makes a significant contribution to the rural economy. A 2004 study by the Association of Deer Management Groups indicated that deer management employs the equivalent of 2,520 full time jobs, the value of which (including related goods and services) is £105 million annually.

3) **How will changes in agriculture, forestry and tourism affect the economies of these areas and what scope is there for alternative sources of income and employment?**

In the context of deer management, changes in other land-uses, particularly agriculture, may have a significant effect on the wild deer populations and, therefore, the management required and associated economic opportunities. If domestic stock numbers in upland areas are reduced, the presence of red deer in some areas may increase and aid the management of plant communities if their numbers are menaged appropriately.

Increasingly land managers are seeking to develop additional sources of income based on the wild deer resource. Tourism is a particular opportunity and there are currently initiatives underway to develop the potential of deer watching as well as maximising the potential participation and income from stalking.

4) **What are the impacts of changes to land use and ownership on the landscape, environment and communities of these areas?**

In recent years there has been an increasing diversity in land ownership and management objectives, driven to a certain extent by increasing NGO and community sector ownership. In the context of deer management, the diversity of management objectives means that mechanisms for communication and co-ordination between management units becomes increasingly important as a means of achieving different land management objectives.

5) **What are the implications of climate change on agriculture/forestry/communities in Scotland's hill and island areas?**

In the immediate future DCS sees climate change as a key driver of integration in land-use policy and practice. It is a theme which cuts across traditional land-use sectors. Adapting to and mitigating climate change will require greater collaboration between land-use sectors and greater integration of management objectives. This is likely to have implications for management structures and approaches, including further development of the collaboration that has become a standard model for the management of the red deer population in upland Scotland.

More specifically, land-use in upland areas has the potential to make a significant and relatively low-cost contribution to storing carbon and minimising its release into the atmosphere through maintenance and expansion of woodland cover and maintenance of vegetation cover on carbon rich soils, including peat. Deer management is a key tool in contributing to this.

6) **What are the regional variations in opportunities and disadvantage and how can these be accounted for in policies and support structures at the Scottish level?**

There are likely to be significant variations in the nature and effects of the key drivers and changes discussed above across different areas of Scotland. In relation to deer management, local management of the wild deer populations is a key principle of DCS's approach. Further consideration at a national level will need to be given to how the interests of different land management sectors can best be integrated at a local or regional level.

Deer Commission for Scotland
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