

Deer management in Knoydart – a response from the John Muir Trust

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The Trust sets the record straight over culling at Li & Coire Dhorrcail - and calls for statutory regulation of deer numbers in Scotland

The background

In late December 2015, the Trust was forced to respond to statements in the media critical of our deer cull on Knoydart from Sir Patrick Grant (owner of the Glendessary sporting estate), and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association.

Subsequently Victor Clements, a member of the executive of the Association of Deer Management Groups, published a lengthy critique on the organisation's website of the Trust's work on Knoydart. His article – *The Knoydart Deer Massacre: What Can We Learn From It?* – raised some fundamental questions of wider relevance, which we address in the response below.



Part of the award-winning new native woodland at Li & Coire Dhorrcail

Victor Clement's article covers many of the key issues surrounding deer management in Scotland. As a member of the Association of Deer Management Groups, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the points he has raised. But first, we want to address some of the emotive language used, which has been a recurring theme for decades.

In the recent past, the National Trust for Scotland has been accused of conducting a “second Glencoe massacre”; Scottish Natural Heritage of carrying out a “bloodbath” and “a serious wildlife crime” in Angus; and Forestry Commission Scotland of creating “killing fields” in the Trossachs. At Glenfeshie, gamekeepers protested against a “massacre” by the Deer Commission Scotland, triggering an inquiry by the then Scottish Executive, which subsequently endorsed the “appropriate and necessary actions taken by DCS”.

The use of such language tends to create more heat than light, but since this type of terminology has been recycled yet again in this latest dispute, we start by addressing some of the specific words.

When is a cull a massacre?

Victor Clements states that he himself has “overseen culls of many thousands of deer to protect native woodlands and the wider environment”. The overall Scottish red deer cull is around 60,000 a year. The private sector, comprising mainly of sporting estates, culls the majority – nearly 50,000 red deer a year. The Scottish Government, through Forest Enterprise, culls over 10,000 red deer a year. Across the 60,000 acres JMT manages we cull around 400 red deer annually.

Over the last five years, we have taken stag culls of 42, 10, 35, 75 and 54 from Li & Coire Dhorrcail. The 86 stags this year were not culled in one large group or on a single day; they were culled individually or in small groups over a three and a half month period during the stag season. Annual culls of 70, 80, 90 and 100 stags are not uncommon among sporting estates across Scotland: according to the ADMG’s Scottish Stag Review 2014 around one fifth of private estates culled upwards of 70 stags each. So why is this cull on Li & Coire Dhorrcail a ‘massacre’?

‘Left to rot’

Of the 400 deer we cull across nine properties, we extract the majority of carcasses for sale to game dealers, and on into the human food chain. Where extraction is difficult but still practical, we take the main venison cuts from culled deer for domestic consumption. We also leave whole carcasses for eagles and other wildlife as well as for recycling nutrients. In some properties, the JMT and the crofting townships on our land receive payments from the government for leaving deer carcasses for eagles.

For context, thousands of deer die on the hill every year in Scotland due to a lack of forage and woodland shelter in the winter. These published figures are based on voluntary data collected by SNH and are widely accepted as an underestimate – many dead deer are not discovered and many others are not reported.

So it appears that the private deer management sector finds it acceptable that thousands (and even tens of thousands) of deer starve to death each year across Scotland, with their carcasses ‘left to rot’, with no venison extracted for human consumption. The management of sporting estates in the Knoydart DMG area contributes to significantly more deer being ‘left to rot’ than were culled and left by JMT. And in contrast to the relatively small number of culled deer carcasses left by JMT, those dying of starvation experience extreme levels of suffering prior to death.

Objectives

The article suggests that the JMT's objectives on Knoydart are "either unrealistic or... would extract too high a cost for an outcome which is likely to be marginal or uncertain".

In its policy paper, *Wild Deer: A National Approach (WDNA)*, the Scottish Government acknowledges that private and public interests can come into conflict, and states: "Whilst investment in deer management provides jobs and supports local communities, maintenance of high deer populations to support demand for stalking may lead to negative effects e.g. environmental."

It continues: "The WDNA vision seeks to achieve the best combination of benefits for the economy, environment and people, while acknowledging that healthy ecosystems underpin sustainable economic growth. This balance will vary at a local level and land management priorities can come into conflict. Where resolving tensions between priorities at a local level is not possible and Government involvement is needed, this intervention will prioritise maintaining healthy ecosystems".

There are public objective targets for biodiversity, woodland expansion and peatland restoration, but as far as we are aware there are no public objective targets in Scotland for the number of stags to be shot for sport, nor for maintaining deer numbers at current levels. On publicly owned land in Scotland (Scottish Government, Forest Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage), where public objectives are the priority, deer densities are low and the primary objective is not sport shooting.

Woodland regeneration and fencing

Victor accepts that in many areas of Scotland "you can see extensive native woodland regeneration achieved by deer control without fences. Controversy has often been generated of course, but the important thing is that very significant areas of new woodland have actually been delivered. While the cost in terms of deer can be high, there have at least been some tangible outcomes, roughly in balance with the cost extracted".

He then goes on to claim that this is not the case on Li & Coire Dhorrcail. In fact over the last 25 years JMT has doubled the area of native woodland cover to over 6 per cent of the property. In June 2015, this work received national recognition when the woodland won the New Native Woodland category of Scotland's Finest Woods award. The new pine wood at Li & Coire Dhorrcail is now on the Forestry Commission national register as an approved local provenance seed source; this may one day help to save the designated pine woodland on a neighbouring estate which, as Victor admits: "has been grazed by deer for decades without any regeneration taking place," and which is cited as "unfavourable declining" since at least 2002 .

The article accuses the JMT of impatience and suggests the charity "waits another 15 years or so until their neighbours are in a position to take down their fences and disperse deer over a wider area". But the JMT has waited 25 years, since the fences at Li & Coire Dhorrcail were erected (when JMT did not have the shooting rights). Back then, it was believed that deer numbers in the wider area would be reduced to sustainable levels compatible with the new woodlands by the time the fences were ready to come down.

But that has not happened – hence the current dispute. Only by increased local culling are we in a position to now demonstrate woodland regeneration outside the fences, along with improving heather cover over a wider area.



Natural birch regenerating taking shape outside of fences at Li & Coire Dhorrcail



April 2010



April 2015

Five years of heather recovery

Close season culling

Victor rightly notes that our in-season stag cull has risen in response to potential restrictions on close-season culling. Following a campaign of opposition from sporting estates, we were advised by SNH not to rely on close-season authorisations, as in previous years; instead, we were advised to increase our culling effort in season.

With close-season culling the deer are closer to the shore and therefore easier to extract by boat. As those who are familiar with this part of Knoydart well know, Li & Coire Dhorrcail is one of the most inaccessible and difficult areas in Scotland from which to extract deer carcasses. It is a nine mile walk-in with no vehicle tracks, and deer extraction involves a half-hour boat trip to Arnisdale when the weather is favourable – and longer in rough seas. So a consequence of our increased in-season cull, when deer are higher up and further out, has been that we have had to leave more carcasses, a problem exacerbated further by the higher temperatures and hence the smaller window available to get venison to the nearest deer larder.

Community engagement

Victor says that “the JMT could learn something from its neighbours if only they would engage a bit more.” The reality on the ground is that the John Muir Trust has a productive and long-standing working relationship with the biggest landowner in the area, the community-owned Knoydart Foundation, which has played a major role in the social, economic cultural and ecological transformation of the peninsula over the past 20 years – even though the day-to-day management objectives of the two organisations are different.

For many years, we were a member of the Knoydart Deer Management Group. Unfortunately, the group was, in our view, largely dysfunctional, and focussed more on generating conflict rather than on working collaboratively. Those for whom sport shooting was the priority made it very difficult to have constructive relationships between neighbours with different priorities. First, they attacked the Knoydart Foundation over its deer reduction plans; then Forest Enterprise over a cull of stags that got into a forestry block; and finally the JMT over stag culling and close-season authorisations (and now for leaving carcasses on the hill).

We do not seek or enjoy conflict. We were party to a genuine attempt to broker an agreement with other deer managers in the Knoydart DMG. We offered stag culling to our neighbours, along with limiting our stag cull to be taken out of season; in return we asked them to increase their hind culls on our marches. Unfortunately this offer was rejected by the Deer Management Group, so we followed the lead of the Knoydart Foundation in leaving the KDMG to form the West Knoydart Deer Management Group (WKDMG). Over the last few years the WKDMG, consisting of over a dozen landowners, crofters and farmers with a range of different objectives, has worked constructively and respectfully together towards developing a shared deer management plan.

Wider picture

Victor’s article alleges that “those 86 stags were killed as part of a wider political lobbying campaign”. This is a false, and entirely unsubstantiated, claim.

While we certainly welcome public debate on deer management, all of the publicity generated both in this instance and in previous ‘deer cull shock horror’ stories has come from the ‘traditional’ sporting sector.

We reported the cull to the West Knoydart Deer Management Group, and did not seek any wider publicity. At no time have we singled out or named individual estates or their owners for public criticism, nor have we, despite our differences, attacked their management practices. Our deer management in Knoydart is driven by our objective of protecting and regenerating the Li & Coire Dhorrcail woodland, a unique outlier of the ancient Caledonian forest which was on the verge of extinction due to over-grazing before the Trust took over its management.

Victor states that “there needs to be some sort of arbitration mechanism or expert panel set up within SNH that can ‘take a view’ on difficult situations”. He further suggests an element of statutory deer planning with appropriate checks and balances.

We agree. We have consistently called for a statutory deer management system to bring Scotland into line with virtually every other European country, where the state or the local authority determines cull levels in the public interest. Such a process would be open, and transparent, and would allow land management on huge tracts of Scotland to be determined in the interest of the wider public and not just of the small number of private individuals who own it.

The John Muir Trust and many other organisations, private landowners and individuals in Scotland believe that our uplands could provide many more public benefits than they currently do, such as flood mitigation, carbon storage and biodiversity conservation. This is not incompatible with sport shooting on private estates, as we can see from those owners who are reducing deer numbers alongside expansion of woodlands outside of fenced enclosures.

In the absence of predators, Scotland needs people to control deer populations – and bring them to a point where healthy deer can coexist with healthy woodlands. The Trust’s deer cull of 400 deer supports four full time staff jobs, five self-employed contractors and two neighbouring estate stalkers. In addition a wide range of stalking guests, including local people, help with the cull. If existing attitudes remain, we will see an ever increasing population of red deer ranging over barren hillsides corralled into smaller areas created by fenced woodland enclosures. Scotland deserves better.