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Deer Framework for the Cairngorms National Park

Cairngorms Deer Advisory Group

Will Boyd-Wallis
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I. INTRODUCTION

The significance of deer to the National Park

Although red and roe deer are native to Britain as a whole, there is perhaps no place more fitting for seeing native red and roe deer than in the native Caledonian Forests, the open heather moorland and montane plateau of the Cairngorms National Park.

Red and roe deer are the largest and arguably the most popular of all species of land mammal in the Cairngorms. In the absence of any natural predators, it is down to man to ensure their populations are managed. Ensuring deer numbers are maintained at levels whereby the habitat upon which they depend is not depleted and they have sufficient food and shelter requires careful planning and sensitive negotiation in particular between neighbouring landowners.

Given that free-living wild deer in law belong to no-one; ensuring that deer populations are managed effectively can be complex, especially so when neighbouring landholdings have different land-management objectives requiring different densities of deer. The grazing impacts of other species: sheep and cattle, rabbits and hares and even small rodents can also be significant when considering the management of deer. From a purely ecological point of view this can be complicated, but add on social and economic objectives to maintain local employment, tourism income, cultural heritage, food production, timber and wood fuel, carbon sequestration, water management, moorland and sporting management and you have a subject that touches upon every person living, working or visiting the National Park.

The purpose of the Deer Framework

How do we ensure that deer and their habitats are sustained into the future in one of the nation's most prized landscapes? We must determine that future generations are not disadvantaged by current day decisions in relation to deer management.

This Deer Framework for the Cairngorms National Park seeks to acknowledge the many different values that people attribute to deer and to bring together those with an interest in their management and promote respect for a range of different management objectives and encourage a spirit of cooperation and compromise.

National and local policy combined

The 'Cairngorms National Park Plan' (2007-2012) contains seven Priorities for Action, one of which is 'Supporting Sustainable Deer Management'. It was agreed as a priority because it was recognised that there are strongly held views about deer and their management, which have been particularly prominent in the Cairngorms National Park. This Deer Framework seeks to address all the issues that have led to any controversy surrounding deer.

The Scottish Government's strategy document, 'Scotland's Wild Deer – A National Approach' (2008) provides a National policy framework aimed at ensuring deer and their management contribute to *a high quality, robust and adaptable environment, sustainable economic development and social well being*. This Deer Framework for the Cairngorms National Park provides a locally based and locally led focus for delivering national policy.

Recent consultation on the proposed ‘Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill’ seeks to find ways of preparing legislation that will support deer management appropriate to the times. A statutory Code for Deer Management is being proposed through the Bill. The Code will make clear what the legal requirements associated with managing deer are as well as provide guidance on achieving wider deer management objectives and aspirations. The intention is that this Deer Framework will work alongside the Code.

Cairngorms Deer Advisory Group

The Cairngorms Deer Advisory Group (CDAG) has been instrumental in assisting the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) in the drafting of this Deer Framework. CDAG was set up in 2006 to:

- promote better communication and understanding between all organisations with an interest in deer and their management in the National Park.
- advise the CNPA on deer and their management.

Deer Management Groups and the Association of Cairngorms Community Councils are represented to give a land management and a local perspective. Public agencies and other voluntary organisations and interest groups help to provide a national perspective.

Membership of CDAG:

- Access and Recreation representative
- Association of Cairngorms Community Councils
- Association of Deer Management Groups
- British Association of Shooting and Conservation
- British Deer Society
- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- Cairngorms Speyside Deer Management Group
- East Grampian Deer Management Group
- East Loch Erlich Deer Management Group
- Forestry Commission Scotland
- Midwest Association of Deer Management Group
- Monadhliath Deer Management Group
- Scottish Environment LINK
- Scottish Gamekeepers Association
- Scottish Natural Heritage
- West Grampian Deer Management Group

2. VISION

A vision for deer in the National Park

The following vision looks 20 years ahead to 2030. It consists of three simple sentences: acknowledging the importance of deer to the environment, to the economy and to social well-being, stating the fundamental importance of caring for their habitat and highlighting the importance of thinking long-term. It recognises that deer play not only an important and integral part in the management of flourishing habitats but they are highly significant in economic terms and also to our sense of well being and cultural identity ...

Native free ranging wild deer are vital to the fabric of the environment, the economy and social well-being in the Cairngorms National Park. Their populations are managed to ensure the habitats upon which they depend for food and shelter are protected and enhanced. The long-term vitality of deer and the economy which depends upon them is secure for future generations.

This vision for the future of deer and their management embraces the vision for the National Park as a whole published in the current National Park Plan (2007) ...

A world-class National Park... An outstanding environment in which the natural and cultural resources are cared for by the people who live there and visit; a renowned international destination with fantastic opportunities for all to enjoy its special places; an exemplar of sustainable development showing how people and place can thrive together. A National Park that makes a significant contribution to our local, regional and national identity.

3. DEER SPECIES IN THE NATIONAL PARK

The Cairngorms National Park hosts five species of deer:

Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*)

Red deer are native¹ and have been here since the end of the last Ice Age over 10,000 years ago. They are the largest and by far the most common deer species in the National Park. A count undertaken in early 2010, which covered much although not all of the National Park, indicated that the population of red deer is somewhere in the region of 40,000. Red deer today occupy the open hill range, but they also desire the shelter and good browsing offered by woodland. Their distribution across the National Park is varied and significantly affected by man's influence.

Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)

Roe deer are also native and very common in the National Park. They are more associated with woodlands or woodland edges than red deer but are found in a wide variety of other habitats including moorland and farmland. They are notoriously difficult to count, but increasing colonisation of gardens and villages and impacts on forestry suggests they are on the increase.

Sika Deer (*Cervus Nippon*)

Sika deer are a non-native species introduced from Japan in the 1890s. They are widely distributed throughout Scotland, but mainly in the North and West. They are more likely to be found in the Monadhliath to the west of the Cairngorms and are occasionally found in other areas within the National Park. Sika deer are able to mate with red deer producing fertile hybrid offspring. This presents a threat to the genetic distinctiveness of the red deer, however a recent study east of the river Spey indicated little evidence of hybridisation in that area. Further work is planned to check the impact of sika deer in other areas of the National Park.

Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*)

Fallow deer were introduced to Britain by the Normans in the 11th Century. There is a small population in Perthshire within the recently extended southern section of the Cairngorms National Park. Fallow deer have also occasionally been reported in the Tomintoul and Braemar area.

Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*)

The Reindeer Centre in Glenmore manages a herd of semi-domestic reindeer which occasionally roam free but are not considered wild. There are mixed views on the ecological impacts of reindeer on the fragile plateau habitats.

¹ Naturally occurring in the UK

4. DEER AND THEIR HABITATS

Deer are an important component of Scotland's diverse wildlife. They serve an important function in manipulating the habitats upon which they depend by browsing, grazing and trampling. In the past, their densities, distribution and movements through the land were influenced by natural predators such as the wolf or the lynx. Today, it is up to us to manage deer populations, to mimic the role of the predators in order to achieve a diverse array of landuse objectives.

The desired state of Scotland's upland landscape and habitats is the source of endless discussion and debate. The nub of that debate can be very crudely summarised as being between two apparently incompatible aims: one to maintain a largely open and generally treeless landscape versus the restoration of native woodland climax vegetation. Connected to those two opposing views are sometimes passionate opinions about landuse that stem from very different cultural backgrounds. Every individual's sympathy with environmental, social and economic objectives heavily influences opinion on how our upland landscapes and habitats should look and be managed. Within all these extremes there is of course plenty of room for shared vision and for compromise.

The Cairngorms National Park is of a sufficient size to host a diverse array of landscapes and habitats and therefore has room to allow for habitat management objectives that suit an equally diverse array of aspirations and perspectives. Whatever that perspective, one truth holds fast: that the land, its soils and the habitats that grow upon them are the *primary resource* upon which everything else depends. In short, we, the deer and every other living plant and creature cannot survive if the habitats and soils become so heavily depleted that they can no longer support the plants that form the start of the food chain.

Thankfully in the National Park, seriously denuded habitats are rare. Landowners and land managers have been controlling grazing and monitoring the condition of the habitats they look after with a long term view of sustainability. Where significant problems have occurred through deer numbers reaching densities above the habitat 'carrying capacity' a range of measures and partnership agreements between government agencies and land managers have helped to resolve them. But upland habitats remain vulnerable and require continual monitoring to ensure that deer and other grazing or browsing species are managed to avoid damage occurring and to allow habitats to recover where necessary.

Today we have much more of a global perspective than ever before. Things that we see happening seemingly slowly on a local scale are part of a massive and rapid movement on a global scale. Through monitoring of designated sites in the National Park, we know that there are clear signs that some habitats are being significantly depleted; this is most evident in shallower vulnerable montane soils and in the deep wholly organic peat soils. Both of these soil types are a common feature of the Cairngorms National Park. We now know that the erosion of carbon rich peat soils contributes significantly to Carbon emissions into the atmosphere and there is a general acceptance that all efforts to sequester carbon in the soil collectively contribute to the global movement to combat potentially catastrophic climate change.

5. THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF DEER

In recent years there has been an upsurge in interest in the economic value of our natural heritage. Figures have been published e.g. Scotland's Environment contributes £17.2 billion of the Scottish Economy which is 11% of the total Scottish output and supports 242,000 jobs².

The most comprehensive study on the economic value of deer was undertaken by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants³ (PACEC) on behalf of the Association of Deer Management Groups in 2006. This report finds that direct and indirect employment connected to Deer Management in Scotland amount to just over 2,500 full time equivalents with an estimated value to the Scottish Economy of approximately £105 million per annum. At a local level in the Cairngorms National Park a recent study⁴ has shown that the wider land-based industry, including sporting estates, accounts for at least 900 jobs in the Park (10% of the total employment) and contributes a minimum of £42 million gross value added to the local economy (11% of the total).

These figures highlight that deer management is by no means peripheral interest to the rural economy. Alongside agriculture, forestry, tourism (including country sports), deer management is a mainstay of the National Park economy. Many properties within the National Park are purchased and managed primarily for field sports, including red deer stalking. The ability to provide red deer stalking contributes to the capital value of land holdings within the Park.

Significant culls, aimed at habitat restoration or grouse-moor management have taken place in the Cairngorms National Park. Such culls have generated concerns amongst some neighbouring estates about the potential impacts on their stalking activity. Accurate assessments of the economic impacts are notoriously difficult because income generation and employment on most estates is typically obtained from a variety of sources.

Alongside traditional deer stalking there is an increasing interest in wildlife tourism. Red deer are a particularly potent symbol of Scotland and have long been of interest to tourists. Many businesses capitalise on the array of wildlife found in the National Park and deer rest alongside the golden eagle, osprey, salmon and red squirrel as the “must-see” wildlife to be found in the National Park.

With increased public awareness of the need to protect diversity of species and habitats has come ecotourism and the opportunity to promote deer stalking as an important tool for conservation. There is a niche market for a commercially run stalking experience sold on the fact that the client is contributing to enhancing habitats but accepts that fewer deer may be available as quarry than in other areas.

Venison, due to a range of national and local initiatives (e.g. the Scottish Venison Working Group and Royal Deeside Food Tourism Group) is increasingly recognised as a healthy, nutritious, food not simply a by-product of the deer stalking industry. It is a relatively lean meat and deer are considered

² SNH “Valuing our Environment – The Economic Impact of Scotland’s Natural Environment”

³ Public and Corporate Economic Consultants, “The contribution of Deer Management to the Scottish Economy”, 2006

⁴ Cogentsi and Rocket Science. “The Economic and Social Health of the Cairngorms National Park, 2010”.

better converters of protein than cattle or sheep. Venison is recognised as an important economic product in its own right that drives the sustainable management of deer.

Supermarkets in the UK currently rely upon imports from as far afield as New Zealand in order to meet demand for venison. This high demand for venison combined with favourable prices (compared with beef and lamb) make deer farms and deer parks an emerging diversification option for farmers in the National Park.

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6. THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DEER

Of the three pillars of sustainability (social, economic and environmental) perhaps the least explored in relation to deer and their management is the social. Deer support a way of life that alongside e.g. farming and forestry provides part of the bedrock of rural society. Our direct association with deer, particularly through deer stalking, is a major part of the social fabric of the National Park. Many extensive land holdings within the National Park have been purchased and managed for centuries as “deer forests”.

Our cultural connection to deer extends even to the kitchen. Venison has of course been a part of our diet since the first hunter-gatherers discovered meat. Today, burgeoning environmental awareness and direct promotion of healthy food is leading to a return to a greater appreciation and consumption of wild and free range meat. One of the great selling points of venison is the sense of connection between landscape and the food we eat.

It's no surprise that Robert Burns found room for deer in one of his most famous songs, written in 1789 in which he said, “*My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer; Chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe...*” The red deer is so rooted in Highland culture that even that most famous of Scottish dances, The Highland Fling is thought to have originated as an impression of the dominant rutting stag.

The *Monarch of the Glen* painted by Edwin Landseer in Glenfeshie in 1851 still accurately reflects the regard in which the red deer are held by many people today. That image (and many others since then on brochures, websites and postcards) conveys a sense of wildness, which our increasingly urbanised society still craves.

6. DEER MANAGEMENT

Why manage deer?

Stable and healthy deer populations are dependent upon adequate food and shelter. In order to ensure suitable habitat into the long-term, it is necessary for grazing to be carefully managed. Deer need to be managed for the sake of the habitats within which they browse, shelter and breed and also to prevent over-population which can lead to starvation and disease. They are also managed in order to achieve a wide range of land use objectives ranging from the protection of farm crops and forestry to game management.

Deer densities can be managed to vary spatially over wide areas in order to suit the available habitat and land management objectives. They can also be managed to fluctuate over time e.g. reducing deer density to allow a pulse of woodland regeneration followed by an increase a number of years later to allow the established woodland to be thinned.

Around 25% of the National Park is designated as internationally important for conservation. There are strong obligations on agencies and land managers to ensure that designated habitats are not damaged. The Joint Agency Working process, led by Scottish Natural Heritage, is intended to ensure that designated habitats are in “favourable condition” or at least recovering condition. This is usually achieved through formal partnership agreements with estates, “Section 7”⁵ Voluntary Control Agreements or in emergencies “Section 10”⁶ intervention measures.

The Cairngorms National Park is renowned for its open landscape, in particular the montane plateau and managed heather moorland which together covers 70% of its area. Sheltered woodland habitat occupies only around 20% of the National Park area and some of this is enclosed by fencing to exclude deer. During severe winter weather deer require woodland for shelter and where this is not available or enclosed to exclude deer mortality rates may be higher and significant damage to habitat may occur.

Many estates within the National Park have aspirations to increase woodland cover. Increased woodland cover is likely to be beneficial to deer and increase their productivity and survival rates. In the long-term this would enable there to be proportionally more deer in the National Park. Enabling woodland regeneration and expansion requires the protection of tree seedlings from browsing. The *Joint Agency Statement and Guidance on Deer Fencing* provides a detailed analysis of both the impacts and benefits of fencing.

Techniques for assessing deer numbers and habitat condition have become more refined in recent years to assist deer management planning. The better the information about habitat condition and grazing pressure the more informed the plan.

Deer Management Groups

⁵ Deer (Scotland) Act 1996

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There are over 50 land-holdings of greater than 500 ha in the Cairngorms National Park and the motivations for controlling deer populations within them vary enormously. This can lead to difficulties where neighbouring estates have incompatible policies for deer management. Deer Management Groups have an important role in promoting compromise and collaborative management.

There are six Deer Management Groups (DMGs) covering land in and around the Cairngorms National Park, Only one of which (the Cairngorms Speyside DMG) is wholly contained within the Park. The other groups are: Monadhliath, Mid-west Association, East Loch Ericht, West Grampian and East Grampian. East Grampian is subdivided into: Upper Deeside, Deeside, Glen Isla/Glen Shee, Angus Glens and Lower Deeside.

Collaborative and inclusive deer management planning

Deer Management Groups also take a lead in the predevelopment of deer management plans which meet the reasonable collective needs of member estates and also take account of national and local interests.

Although the right to shoot deer may rest primarily with the landowner or occupier, their management has important implications for others including those with related business interests and those with obligations to protect certain national or European designated habitats. The development of a deer management plan should take account of all relevant views and such obligations.

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7. AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

To achieve the objectives of both those who own, manage or make their living from the land and those who access the land, there requires to be mutual respect and consideration for the objectives, desires and needs of others. This can be achieved by communication and better awareness and understanding of the various interests involved.

Red deer have been cited as the most popular wild species in Scotland in a survey conducted by the Scottish Government. Seeing wild deer in the dramatic scenery of the Cairngorms National Park can be an unforgettable experience. Seeing and hearing deer can be one of the many reasons residents stay in the area. Deer stalking and deer management is an important economic activity within the Park; it attracts high spending visitors and is a reason for investment by many land owners and sporting tenants and is a major employer in more remote areas. It is important that visitors and residents fully appreciate the reasons why deer need to be managed and culled and the benefits to the local economy.

The right to responsible public access to the countryside is now enshrined in Scottish law. Access legislation⁷ places an obligation on the land owner to use and manage the land in a way which respects access rights and does not cause unreasonable interference to those exercising them. Deer managers should communicate effectively about where and when culls are taking place so that those accessing the National Park may do so responsibly with minimum impact on stalking.

A number of estates in the National Park have taken up the *Heading for the Scottish Hills* pilot project to provide a web-based site for informing the public about stalking activities. This most usefully provides readily-accessible details of who to contact for more information.

⁷ Land Reform (Scotland) Act, 2003

8. SUSTAINING THE DEER RESOURCE

Introduction

The National Policy document *Scotland's Wild Deer a National Approach* set out “guiding principles for ways of working”. This section builds on those principles and provides a more local approach in the Cairngorms National Park for *sustaining the deer resource* into the long-term.

Wild deer are integral to the many ecosystems that make up the landscape of the National Park. The principles below acknowledge the functions of landowners/land managers, agencies, interest groups and the public in the management of deer. They are based on acknowledgement of the public interest in deer management, the diversity estate objectives across the National Park and the key role of landowners as stewards of the countryside.

Ultimately the aim of the six principles below is to maintain local business and employment, to support rural communities and to protect the National Park environment.

Management based on sound evidence and objectives

Deer are managed to ensure the maintenance of good quality deer habitat, to maintain the health and welfare of the deer herd and to take account of other land uses. Management should be guided by knowledge of population density, welfare, habitat condition and grazing pressure obtained through best practice monitoring techniques.

Public benefits and public funding

The provision of public benefits through deer management, which may not be in the immediate interests of the landowner, may be a justification for public funding assistance.

Integration and collaboration

Neighbouring landowners do not operate in isolation, but through Deer Management Groups, can reconcile competing objectives and involve other interest groups in decision making.

Geographic areas and timescales

Densities of deer across the National Park vary in both space and time and can be managed to allow a diversity of land use objectives to be met.

Communication

Wider understanding of the value and importance of deer, their management and the range they occupy should be promoted.

Marketing

New opportunities to optimise the value of wild deer for food, crafts, tourism and sport should continue to be explored.

9. DELIVERY

The future of the deer in the National Park depends upon carefully planned management, good quality habitat and the co-operation of deer managers. The following allocated roles provide a checklist of both practical and strategic activities that are required to help ensure sustainable deer management that meets national policy objectives⁸, the objectives of individual land managers and other relevant interest groups.

Each function has been allocated to one of four groups with a particular interest in deer and their management in the Cairngorms National Park, but this does not mean they are exclusively the responsibility of that group.

The four groups are:

- *Estates and Deer Management Groups* – this includes all estates whether privately owned or run by non-governmental organisations or public agencies. It also includes the deer management groups connected to the National park
- *Scottish Natural Heritage* – SNH has taken on the role of the Deer Commission for Scotland and continues to hold overall responsibility for ensuring designated sites are in favourable condition
- *Cairngorms National Park Authority* – CNPA has a co-ordinating role embracing the four aims of the Cairngorms National Park
- *Cairngorms Deer Advisory Group* – CDAG brings together representatives of all with an interest in deer across the National Park and who monitor and provide advice on sustainable deer management

Estates and Deer Management Groups

- Monitor health and condition of deer
- Conduct annual systematic comparable counts of deer numbers
- Use best practice methods to annually monitor the effects of herbivore grazing, browsing and trampling
- Ensure each DMG has an agreed Deer Management Plan which guides and informs deer management
- Openly and amicably resolve deer related issues arising from competing land management objectives

⁸ Wild Deer A National Approach, Cairngorms National Park Plan 2007-2013.

Scottish Natural Heritage

- Provide opportunities for training in best practice methods of monitoring habitat and deer populations
- Provide guidance on research into best practice methods of habitat and population monitoring that are practical, affordable and effective
- Keep under review the case for providing public support to DMGs to provide collaborative plans
- Keep under review the need to undertake monitoring of the density and distribution of deer across the entire National Park every five years
- Advise on procedures for monitoring the Joint Agency Working process in order to ensure designated habitats are in “favourable condition” or at least “recovering”
- Monitor the populations of non-native deer in order to assist measures to prevent their incursion or increase in the National Park

Cairngorms National Park Authority

- Support the Cairngorms Deer Advisory Group
- Stimulate improved understanding of deer management objectives across the National Park through mapping
- Promote awareness and understanding of the role deer management plays in the local economy and the management of important habitats.
- Promote venison and other deer related products
- Ensure there is an active website presence explaining the importance of deer and their management in the National Park
- Work with rangers to encourage links with local schools to promote understanding of deer management and stalking
- Promote new opportunities for more people to understand and experience deer management and stalking

- Encourage co-operation in marketing of sport and venison
- Conduct research into the value of deer and associated economic importance in the National Park
- Publish and promote the Deer Framework to appropriate audiences

Cairngorms Deer Advisory Group

- Promote better communication and mutual understanding between all organisations with an interest in deer and their management in the National Park
- Advise the CNPA on deer and their management in the National Park
- Advise CNPA, SNH and other public agencies on local application of National initiatives relating to deer, such as the Code for Deer Management
- Maintain an overview of health, welfare and population density of all deer species in the National Park
- Support deer managers and deer management groups across the National Park
- Improve understanding of Deer Management Plans across the National Park by consulting with DMGs to produce a map of deer managers' aspirations.
- Review the effectiveness of deer management planning in the National Park
- Co-ordinate and stimulate new research into deer and their management in the National Park
- Monitor the value and effectiveness of the Deer Framework