

Deer

The management of wild deer should be regulated on the basis of a stronger presumption in favour of woodland expansion.

Protecting young woodland (planted or naturally regenerated) from deer is one of the principal costs of afforestation in Scotland. At deer densities exceeding 5 per 100ha, woodland establishment is increasingly jeopardised. The pattern of deer density varies across Scotland, and across species, but in much of the country numbers exceed this critical threshold by some margin (sometimes up to 40+ per 100ha), so young woodland simply does not survive without expensive protection.

Traditionally, high densities of deer have been widely regarded as acceptable in vast tracts of the uplands where the 'sporting' estate has enjoyed a presumption of dominance, and where abundant deer are a feature of Scotland's traditional pattern of open hill stalking.

However, it is time to re-assess the validity of this presumption; the balance of interests has shifted very significantly in the last few decades. Fewer upland estates conform to the traditional pattern of hunting, shooting and fishing; their neighbours often wish to pursue different objectives requiring fewer deer; and the positive values of woodland cover to the wider public interest are increasingly recognised, including river hydrology and fisheries management, biodiversity and soil conservation. Even more significantly, the role of woodlands in carbon sequestration has been a principal driver in the Scottish Government's target for increase of woodland cover by at least 10,000ha per year.

So it is now important to review the relationship between deer and land use. We need to recalibrate our limits of tolerance to the way that all species of deer - including roe on lower ground - impact on a wide suite of private and public interests, and to update the expectations we place on land owners who, although they don't own them (deer are a public resource) have responsibilities to manage their numbers in exchange for the exclusive right to hunt them. In many areas, high deer numbers are simply a result of neglect or unwillingness to invest in adequate culls. Improved levels of control would also benefit the deer themselves and their hunters. Deer reach much higher weights with bigger trophy heads when living at lower densities in harmony with woodland development.

Good progress has been made towards re-setting terms: the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2010 defines the wider suite of interests now needing to be considered, and a new official code of practice encourages collaboration in achieving a compromise where interests conflict. But acceptable limits are still unclear. When is official intervention justified?

Currently, mandatory reductions are only undertaken where a very strong case can be made. Government agencies have acted to prevent damage to a number of designated sites for biodiversity; elsewhere high numbers are tolerated, despite widely reported damage and conflict.

This neglect of generalised harm to the interests of both neighbours and the wider public is no longer appropriate. We need to move towards a regime where this presumption is turned on its head. It shouldn't be acceptable for deer numbers to rise above levels compatible with other

interests, including woodland establishment, *except* where thoroughly justified in economic, social and environmental terms.

It is time for a new debate and more objective analysis to support the replacement of seriously outdated presumptions, and the design of new models of regulation. Options for debate should include a licensing scheme and the re-introduction of sporting rates.