
Historical background

Red deer and roe deer are native to the UK. Hundreds of years ago the fallow deer was introduced and more recently the UK's deer fauna has been further added to by muntjac, sika and Chinese water deer. Current populations of deer are estimated to be 400,000 for red deer, 400,000 for roe, 110,000 for fallow, 50-100,000 for muntjac 30-50,000 for sika and 650 for Chinese water deer. ⁱ

Deer populations have long been of concern to foresters, particularly in Scotland, but have become a high profile issue within conservation in England and their expansion into Wales is also generating debate. Around 1900 deer numbers were in decline. Woodland clearance and hunting had led to reduced population levels. The twentieth century saw a dramatic turnaround in the fortunes of deer, which are now commonplace throughout most of rural Britain as deer continue to rise in numbers and to extend their range.

Deer and their impact

Deer are an important part of our wildlife, which people enjoy seeing but they can have a range of negative impacts on the environment, including:

- Preventing the growth of young trees or coppice re-growth by browsing, fraying or bark stripping
- Some species preferring to feed on bluebells, oxlips and other woodland flowers
- Damaging crops where they occur in large numbers.

Deer are often cited as a cause of woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest being in unfavourable condition. However, despite the strength of concern expressed by some people about the scale of the threat posed to biodiversity by deer, evidence of negative impacts at all but a site scale (e.g. at Monks Wood, Cambridgeshire and Wytham Wood, Oxford) is equivocal. For example, the recent Bunce reportⁱⁱ identified that increased grazing was correlated with increased ground flora species-richness. Similarly, whilst the recent Repeat Woodland Bird Surveyⁱⁱⁱ suggested that changes in woodland structure were the most likely driver for many of the bird declines, they were not correlated with deer data. In both cases, it may be that the variables recorded, or the way in which they were observed, was inadequate for the purposes of analysis. However, one might equally draw the conclusion that concerns in relation to deer may be a result of local rather than general issues and that different deer species have different impacts.

Relationships between deer densities and deer impacts at a landscape-scale especially in the lowlands seem to be particularly poorly researched and understanding of the impact of interactions between deer species and with other wild and domestic grazers is only in its infancy^{iv}. The same could also be said to be true of some of the potentially beneficial impacts of deer, such as their purported role in longer distance dispersal of other species.

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However, there is agreement in the literature that intermediate levels of grazing/browsing are probably most beneficial, although clearly this may vary dependent on the key features of a site.

Deer management

Whilst there is a range of legislation which affects the control of deer and the use of firearms, only in Scotland is there a statutory agency, the Deer Commission for Scotland, with specific powers to promote deer management including giving support to deer management groups. No statutory framework exists to support deer management throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. In recent years, the Deer Initiative (a partnership of organisations interested in deer management, conservation and welfare) has actively promoted collaborative deer management in England, where Deer Management Groups exist in some areas, formed by neighbouring landowners. While sustained control at anything other than a very local level (e.g. individual sites or estates) has not been achieved, it is worthy of note that red, sika and fallow deer are herding species, which could enable effective control or eradication if landowners were of a like mind. However, roe and muntjac are not gregarious, which leads many to contend that even if there is a will there will not be a way to sustain their effective control at anything other than a site level.

The Woodland Trust's approach

The Woodland Trust recognises that deer are an important part of our natural heritage. In managing deer we aim to strike a balance between deer numbers and the wider needs of the woodland environment. With this in mind the Trust:

- will co-operate with our neighbours and local Deer Management Groups, and participate where appropriate.
- does not permit the hunting of animals for sport in its woodlands, including the hunting of deer. The generation of income from venison will not be a factor in considering the need for deer control
- will produce management plans for its properties containing prescriptions to minimise deer damage where they have a negative impact on our woods. These will provide for the control of deer where necessary and where such measures can be sustained for so long as the risk of damage continues

will comply with all the statutory requirements affecting deer management and will use only humane methods of control.

The Woodland Trust monitors the impact of deer at our sites and assesses the degree to which the deer are affecting our objectives for the management of individual sites and the wider semi-natural habitats around them. Where there is evidence that the deer are having a detrimental impact on a site or the wider habitat then the Trust will undertake management action. Our properties encompass a wide variety of situations both in terms of conservation value and the extent of public access. The Trust encourages its managers to develop local prescriptions, which take account of local circumstances.

We will consider a range of options, balancing the needs of the habitat, our neighbours, other species and the deer themselves. These options could include or be a combination of the following:

- Decisions on felling or coppicing will take account of deer. The Trust will consider the size and shape of areas felled with the aim of minimising the impact deer will have on

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subsequent regeneration. Where it is expected that deer damage is likely to be high it may effect the decision on whether to fell or coppice at all.

- Where deer damage is likely to be high either to newly established woodland or to coppice the Trust will consider protection of the habitat, through fencing or brushwood hedges. Where fencing is appropriate we will take into consideration the impact such fencing will have on the landscape and other species. In some cases it may be more appropriate to protect young trees individually.
- In some circumstances none of the above may be effective. In these cases the Trust will undertake humane culling of deer numbers to a level whereby the damage levels are acceptable in the context of the objectives of the site, the needs of our neighbours and the needs to maintain a viable deer population. Where possible this will be undertaken as part of a Deer Management Group.
- Where deer are affecting the interests of our neighbours then the Trust would consider culling as part of a wider Deer Management Plan and as part of a Deer Management Group provided that this is not detrimental to the conservation interests of the wider area.

The Woodland Trust's Native Species Conservation Position Statement (2005) states: *When considering the need to control a species, its native or non-native status is unimportant. The key issue is whether it is causing significant ongoing habitat change or loss of other species, additional to that from climate change.*

Thus, the Woodland Trust believes that although it is easy to get drawn down a route of considering muntjac, sika and fallow and Chinese water deer, which are non-native, rather differently from red and roe deer, which are native, the same principles should underpin the management of all deer species.

In practice, the Woodland Trust has:

- been on the Council of the Deer Initiative since its inception and has been pressing for a simple method by which site managers can assess deer impacts
- been a member of the Deer Management Round Table in Scotland since 2001, which is appointed by the Deer Commission for Scotland to provide policy advice
- commissioned the University of York and the Central Science Laboratory to review the impacts of deer and deer management on woodland biodiversity in the English lowlands, key gaps in current knowledge and future research needs; within individual sites, at a landscape-scale and regionally
- contributed to the development of a project on collaborative management of deer funded by the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU)^y and advocated further research into; relationships between deer densities and deer impacts at a landscape-scale, the impact of interactions between deer species and with other grazers, and longer distance dispersal of plants by deer
- developed a case for stronger measures for deer management planning in Scotland with other members of Scottish Wildlife & Countryside Link
- helped to form deer management groups, for example, at Fordham, Essex and Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire

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- has acted as the secretary for the Balquhiddy Deer Management Group in the Trossachs and employs a ranger who spends part of their time managing deer at Glen Finglas and Milton

The Woodland Trust's wider view

In a wider context, the Woodland Trust supports those neighbours and landowners who manage deer on their estates in a similar manner to the Trust. In essence, the Woodland Trust believes that landowners should:

- Ensure clarity of management objectives for their property
- Consider deer on a site by site basis
- Optimise deer impacts through appropriate woodland management (given that impacts may be both beneficial and detrimental)
- Cooperate with local Deer Management Groups
- Only use humane methods of control
- Take account of the conservation interests of the wider area.

Further research should address:

- The positive and negative impacts of deer at wider than a site scale
- The impact of interactions between deer species and with other grazers
- The practical and political problems of wider collaborative deer management.

References

ⁱ Derived from Harris, S., Morris, P., Wray, S. & Yalden, D. (1995) *A Review of British Mammals: Population Estimates and Conservation Status of British Mammals other than Cetaceans*. JNCC, Peterborough, and Munro R (2002) , *Report on the Deer Industry in Great Britain*. Report for Defra and Food Standards Agency

ⁱⁱ Kirby, K.J., Smart, S.M., Black, H.I.J., Bunce, R.G.H., Corney, P.M. & Smithers R.J. (2005) Long term ecological change in British woodland (1971-2001). *English Nature Research Reports* No. 653

ⁱⁱⁱ Amar, A., Hewson, C.M., Thewlis, R.M., Smith, K.W., Fuller, R.J., Lindsell, J.A., Conway, G., Butler, S. & MacDonald, M (2005) What's happening to our woodland birds? Long-term changes in the populations of woodland birds. *RSPB Research Reports* No. 19. *BTO Research Reports* No. 169.

^{iv} White, P.C.L., Ward, A.I., Smart, J.C.R. & Moore, N.P. (2004) *Impacts of deer and deer management on woodland biodiversity in the English lowlands*. The Woodland Trust

^v <http://www.macaulay.ac.uk/RELU/index.html>