

Position Statement

Deer

January 2020



WOODLAND
TRUST

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Introduction

The UK has six species of deer: native red and roe deer; fallow deer - present since at least Norman times; and sika, Reeves muntjac and Chinese water deer - introduced in the past 150 years. The geographic distribution, impact and behaviour vary with each species.

Recent decades have seen a sharp rise in the UK's deer population. Deer no longer have natural predators here, although they do experience losses to disease, weather, and vehicle collisions. Deer numbers have increased dramatically due to expanding woodland cover, better opportunities for food because of changes in agriculture such as more winter cereals, milder winters and improved access to urban green space,

Deer are an important part of the UK's woodland ecology and can have a vital role to play in balanced woodland and wood-pasture ecosystems. However with numbers thought to be higher than at any time in the last 1,000 years, in many parts of the UK they have reached levels where they seriously threaten the habitats that they and other species depend on. Browsing by deer is now a major threat to the health and resilience of woodlands (see box opposite).

High deer populations can increase environmental, economic and social costs to the UK, for example through more road traffic accidents; the spread of Lyme disease in humans; damage to agricultural crops; the need for extensive deer fencing for forestry; damage to ancient and other native woodlands; suppression of natural regeneration of trees and plants and damage to nationally and internationally designated sites.

In mainland Europe, deer fencing is virtually non-existent and most woodland regenerates naturally. In many of these countries deer management is more integrated with other land uses, and is highly regulated, with culls set and monitored by local or national government authorities to ensure the protection of the natural environment.

In the UK, deer numbers are indirectly determined by each landowner through their choice of action – or inaction – to manage deer. Land management in many areas of the UK (particularly in Scotland) includes large private sporting estates with full time professional gamekeepers focused on maintaining deer populations for recreational hunting. Any co-operation between owners for environmental objectives is largely voluntary.

The Woodland Trust's view:

Deer are an important and valuable part of the UK's biodiversity. However, the impact of high deer populations on the successful creation, restoration and protection of native woodland is constraining the UK's ability to combat climate change and improve ecosystem services through woodland expansion, and to improve the resilience of our woodland habitats to for example, tree diseases and pests.

Evidence shows voluntary approaches are not maintaining deer at sustainable levels and that better regulation and incentives focused on cooperative action between landowners could ensure lower and more natural densities of deer. This would benefit deer welfare, the environment and public safety. There would also be significant economic savings from avoided fencing costs, fewer insurance claims from deer vehicle collisions, less damage to valuable crops and habitats, and less need for costly tree planting due to insufficient natural regeneration. Regulated management for deer would also support the UK's climate change targets and tree disease recovery through woodland expansion.

The Woodland Trust believes that management of deer to achieve sustainable and healthy deer populations is most effective when carried out collaboratively at a landscape scale (due to the free-roaming nature of individual and herds of deer). Systematic monitoring of deer impacts, and the development and implementation of management strategies, should also be carried out at a landscape scale wherever possible.

Impacts of deer on woodland ecosystems

Evidence tells us that high deer numbers are leading to significant negative impacts on the structure and biodiversity of many of our most valued woodlands. Pressure from deer browsing causes declines in characteristic herbaceous plants, birds, invertebrates and mammals like the dormouse because it removes the structural complexity of woodland by limiting the growth of many shrub and tree species, and preventing their regeneration (including coppice regrowth). One extensive study found the reduction in low shrub cover due to deer reduced numbers of willow warbler, garden warbler, song thrush, nightingale, dunnock and bullfinch.

Woodlands are becoming less diverse in their tree and shrub species composition over time, with deer browsing even influencing the composition of the canopy layer. In addition, tougher species like grasses and sedges are being favoured over more delicate woodland flowers.

Of course, some important habitats like wood-pasture rely on an element of browsing pressure to retain their characteristic features such as open-grown 'parkland' trees, many of which can reach a great age, and for the wealth of biodiversity such as lichens and deadwood invertebrates that they support in their complex structures.

The Trust will:

- Participate actively in national forums and initiatives seeking appropriate deer management;
- Support landscape scale co-operation between land managers through our outreach work, to achieve a landscape with sustainable deer populations to meet woodland conservation outcomes;
- Support further research on deer and their relationship with woods and their impact on biodiversity and seek to understand deer impacts in relation to other mammals;
- Support and champion development of policy and better regulation across the UK countries to encourage responsible management of deer populations to benefit both environmental conservation and deer welfare;
- Communicate with relevant audiences about our approach to deer management for woodland conservation outcomes.

On our estate we will:

- Monitor the impact of deer on our conservation objectives in the context of the surrounding landscape and public safety. This includes:
 - Setting clear objectives e.g. using the Woodland Grazing Toolbox;
 - Site based deer impact assessments and deer density counts;
 - Regular woodland condition assessment;
 - Deer vehicle collision counts; and
 - Taking account of the impacts recorded on neighbours' land and adjacent sites of conservation importance.
- Manage deer populations where evidence suggests this is necessary and feasible to promote positive conservation outcomes such as natural regeneration of trees and shrubs, a diversity of flowering plants and healthy wild deer. This can include fencing or individual tree protection, and/or humane culling of deer to a specific density where monitoring suggests this is necessary.
- Co-operate with neighbours and local deer management groups, participate in wider management schemes where appropriate, and actively help to set up deer management groups where there is a need.
- Use only non-toxic ammunition from the 1 April 2020 as part of a commitment to reduce lead getting into the environment and potentially the human food chain.
- Not permit hunting of deer for sport on our estate.

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