

The Deer Initiative

Deer, Habitats and Impacts Conference March 2007

Keynote speech

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Introduction

- Why is the Deer Initiative so important?
- Because of the impact of deer on the natural environment, on crops and on public health and safety.
- There is often a tendency to focus on the negatives/the problems. But there is also a positive side. I will cover both. I will also refer to what are for me the two distinguishing characteristics of the DI.

Where we are

- The need to improve coordinated action for the sustainable management of deer was recognised when Elliot Morley gave the keynote address to the last conference 4 years ago.
- At that time getting to grips with coordinated deer management - and the Partnership and Deer Initiative Ltd were (as they still are) at the forefront of the endeavour.
- It is important not to take for granted the co-operative partnership on which the DI is founded. Bringing together the public sector, voluntary and business interests in this way is not easy to pull off.
- This is a model from which others can learn.

Progress

- Over the last 4 years DI Ltd, with assistance of funding from FC, NE founding bodies and Defra, has provided the glue that holds together the partnership and ensured it delivered in areas such as the organisation of deer management groups, provision of expert advice both centrally and through regional Deer Liaison Officers (DLO).
- DI has played a crucial role in achievements so far providing both leadership and coordination for most of the work.
- The extension of coverage of deer liaison officers over most of the country is a major achievement. DI Ltd now has deer liaison officers in Central, Eastern, Southern, SE and SW regions - not to mention Wales.
- DI has worked hard in engaging and assisting other sectors outside the traditional agriculture/Forestry concerns.

- DI have been working in cooperation with Defra on issues such as TB in deer where, working through DLOs, increased surveillance and awareness raising of the disease has been achieved.
- Also, increased visibility of deer issues in areas such as highways management, where the work on identifying areas of high deer vehicle collisions, the causes of those collisions and measures to mitigate future collisions has the potential to save lives.
- Importantly, from my remit, increasing the focus on managing deer to protect SSSIs. And other high value nature conservation areas.

Defra and Deer

- The Defra family has also played its part in this partnership in ways additional to helping with the funding.
- In 2004 the Forestry Commission, Defra, English Nature, and The Countryside Agency worked in conjunction with the DI to develop an action plan for the sustainable management of wild deer populations in England.
- This action plan has provided the framework and driving force for all subsequent work on deer in England.
- The Deer RRO, currently in progress through Parliament will provide a wider range of tools for deer management, by modernising the Deer Act. These are tools asked for by deer managers and now being delivered by Defra. The RRO will also improve welfare of deer in a number of important respects.
- The Game RRO, also before Parliament, will remove outdated restrictions on dealing in venison, remove administrative burdens and help the market to develop.

The Future

- There has been really good progress, with Government doing its bit. But plenty of challenges remain.
- The deer population is expected to continue to increase in both numbers and range, challenges will therefore remain and the need for coordinated management, a centre for advice and research will remain.
- DI work will obviously play a central role in maintaining and building on successes that have already been made. Important work of the DI best practice working group to develop and disseminate best practice in support of National Occupational Standards. Work to be completed September 2008. The outcomes will aid in sustainable management of deer
- But, there are still areas for improvement. There is a need for much better and more accessible data on deer populations and I am encouraged that Forest Enterprise, Defra and DI are looking to develop this important aspect of evidence gathering for deer managers.
- There is a need for sustained and improved efforts for disease monitoring in deer, whether well known diseases such as bTB and Lymes or new and emerging diseases. The DI needs to consider how it can contribute to these issues.

- Deer, like other species, give rise to questions about our approach to non-native species. When do they move from a welcome addition to our biodiversity to a threat to it?
- Again and again deer and DI demonstrate key themes that we are tackling in the England Biodiversity Strategy.
- Much of this is problems and threats.
- But there are also opportunities.
- Deer are our largest land animal. In the right numbers and densities they make a positive contribution to our habitats.
- For a predominately urban population, the sight of a wild deer on a visit to the countryside can be the highlight of the visit. They are iconic, charismatic, photogenic creatures. They represent a recreational resource.
- And venison is a market which many see as having great potential for further growth.
- Deer management therefore has all the makings of a success story reflecting sustainable management of a natural resource or sustainable extraction of value from an ecosystem service.

Closing Remarks

- I have said why I think that deer management is important. I have identified what for me are the DI's two defining characteristics: the cross sector co-operation and a case study in what can be achieved by successful management of the natural environment.
- DI Ltd and the DI partnership have made great strides over the last 4 years in addressing the problems caused by deer. They have promoted deer issues and impacts across landowners and managers, in persuasive and energetic manner.
- There is no doubt that without the work of DI deer management in England and Wales would still be carried out in an ad hoc manner and not tackling the issues increasing deer numbers pose.
- Having worked to get the structures in place, now is the time to lay plans for the future and capitalise on what you have achieved so far.
- This conference will discuss a wide range of issues over the next two days and will generate wide ranging views on what has been done and what needs to be done.
- I hope that in considering the problems you remember the opportunities.
- I hope that you don't take for granted the principles and co-operation on which DI is founded - but continue to value and nurture them.
- And I hope that you have a really good Conference.