

The Deer Initiative

Deer, Habitats and Impacts Conference March 2007

Chairman's introduction - Jane Rabagliati

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and a very warm welcome to this conference, the second organised by the Deer Initiative.

Our theme for the next 2 days is "Deer – Habitats and Impacts", and we have a comprehensive programme for you, which will enable us to share with you some of the developments since the last conference 4 years ago. You will all have a copy of the programme in your packs – there have been one or two changes to the running order, so please disregard the earlier versions you may have.

But first let me introduce myself:

I was appointed as Chairman of the DI in May 2005; before that – until I took voluntary early retirement in March 2005 – a career spanning nearly 30 years with MAFF and subsequently Defra, most recently as Rural and SD Director in GO-East. I'm not a deer expert, nor am I a stalker – it is my job to be independent of the different sectoral interests within the DI, of which more anon. But in the nearly 2 years I've been doing this job I've learnt a lot, and am looking forward to learning more, and to meeting those of you I haven't met before, over the next 2 days.

Throughout history man has been sharing these islands with wild deer. Our native species – roe and red – have probably been here as long as we have; the fallow are widely believed to have arrived with the Normans; and the last century has seen a significant expansion of other non-natives, mostly escapees from parklands, the most prolific being muntjac, followed by sika and (in sixth place) Chinese water deer. The last century has seen an exponential growth in deer numbers. No-one knows exactly how many deer there are, but informed estimates indicate that there are in excess of 1 million (across all 6 species).

Perhaps ironically, with the growing emphasis on habitat conservation and management, we have contributed to the conditions which have made it possible for all 6 species to extend their ranges and to find new ways of adapting to having humans as neighbours. We all love to see deer in the wild: I certainly do. But whilst they have an aesthetic, economic and recreational value they also have the potential to cause adverse economic, environmental and human interest impacts. These impacts are important at a national scale but can be even more significant at a local or landscape level. In particular there is an increasing impact of wild deer on the environment in general and native biodiversity specifically. There is also growing concern over the encroachment of deer into urban areas and the considerable number of deer vehicle collisions. The scale of the

various impacts of wild deer is detailed in the DI Vision statement which can be found on our website at www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk. The Vision statement highlights that the impacts of wild deer are significantly wider than is often perceived and that the adverse impacts in particular are steadily increasing.

So good wild deer management plays an essential part in the maintenance of the woodlands and other natural habitats that make the British countryside so special.

Whilst collectively, deer remain a national issue, it is at a local or landscape level that their impacts are felt most. It follows that any solution to these impacts can, therefore, only be achieved by co-operation at a local level. Consequently, we remain convinced that the key to successful deer management is collaboration of local landowners and managers who can operate at a landscape scale.

Which is where the Deer Initiative comes in.

The DI was created in 1995.

It is a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private interests which recognises that wild deer are an important part of our natural resources and play a major role in our economy, environment and history.

All partners recognise that many individuals provide a significant contribution towards managing deer populations, whether through their recreational or professional activities. They undertake to facilitate and support these efforts.

By working on a landscape scale with landowners and land managers, whether directly or through membership organisations such as the CLA, we can help ensure that wild deer populations are healthy and sustainable and that they contribute to everyone's enjoyment of our countryside and to the economy of our rural areas, and that their negative impacts on issues as wide-ranging as biodiversity and road safety are kept to a minimum.

Most partners make a modest financial contribution (typically about £1,000) but the key is that they engage actively with promoting the objective of the Deer Initiative, which is ***“to ensure the delivery of a sustainable, well managed wild deer population in England and Wales”***.

The Partnership provides a forum for government bodies and non-governmental organisations to debate openly the deer management issues of concern to their organisations, to respect each other's positions and where possible to identify agreed solutions.

The Partnership also provides an important opportunity for influencing Government policy and advising on deer management priorities. Of course our Partners have a wide range of views and cannot always reach agreement on every point. However, the opportunity

for discussion on controversial matters helps to ensure a balanced and focussed response to Government consultations.

Current members of the Deer Initiative partnership are listed in the Annual Review, which you will find in your packs. Since that was published The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts has joined; and we are currently in discussion with the Small Woods Association and Defence Deer management/Defence Estates. Although not a member, the RSPB works closely with us on a number of projects, including notably the Arne peninsula in Dorset, a major RSPB reserve with a huge population of Sika deer.

The Chairman's position – my position – is independent.

The independent nature of the DI has enabled it to bring together a wide range of organisations and individuals with an interest in the various impacts of deer to co-operate. Independence has allayed suspicion about motives and allowed open discussion and co-operation between organisations with very different aims and objectives. The value of this and the effort taken to achieve it cannot be over-stated.

The DI's role in helping the Government deliver its policy objectives on wild deer is recognised in the Defra family action plan on sustainable wild deer management, which was published in December 2004. At that time Defra undertook to support us financially for at least another 3 years (i.e. to the end of 2007/08).

That commitment came after our last conference in March 2003 that looked at the future for deer in England and Wales. Then we focussed on the expanding deer populations encouraged by changes in land use, particularly the expansion of forestry that provided increased habitat suitable for deer.

Since then we have consolidated our position with the appointment of Deer Liaison Officers in the East of England, South-East, South-West, and Central England, a Deer Officer in Wales, and the retention of a number of Deer management Consultants who provide additional support. This has enabled us to work closely with partners at the local level to take a more structured and collaborative approach to managing wild deer. Although improvements in habitat condition can take time to manifest themselves, we are now beginning to see a real difference. We will be hearing about some of these results over the next 2 days.

So this conference is very timely. Our current funding agreement takes us to March 2008, and we are now discussing with our major funders in the Defra family what happens after that – and we are therefore particularly grateful to John Robbs, Director of Wildlife and Countryside at Defra, for coming to address us this morning. John and I have worked together on many issues over the years, and I know he will have some interesting things to say to us.

We believe the Partnership delivers a lot for very little, mainly because of our ability to mobilise the efforts of others. We could not achieve one tenth of what we do without the

considerable support of our private sector partners, whose knowledge, networks, members and staff are our eyes, ears and pairs of hands out there in the real world.

And, of course, that includes all of you who have taken time from your busy lives to be with us for the next two days. Your input to this conference can make a real difference to the future direction of the Deer Initiative. You will no doubt be pleased to see that we won't be sending you away into classrooms, but we have allowed time at the end of each session for discussion, and I would encourage you all to participate in those discussions.

So without further ado, I would like to introduce Paul Hill-Tout, Director, Forestry Commission England, who is going to chair our opening session. The FC website's description of Paul's job is "advising Westminster Ministers on forestry policy with respect to England, leading the implementation of the England Forestry Strategy and managing the work of the nine England Conservancies, 11 forest districts and the National Arboreta." That keeps him pretty busy! He is particularly interested in the challenges posted both for individual colleagues and FC as a whole in developing woodlands to serve the needs of society in a sustainable manner over the long-term, which chimes in very much with our work.

Speaker's biography

After graduating from the University of Oxford Jane joined (the then) MAFF in 1975 and had a varied career with the Department including a secondment to Unigate in 1979 (where she worked on industrial relations structures in the business), 2 years as Private Secretary to the Minister of State (The Rt Hon Alick Buchanan-Smith MP) and two tours on loan to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (in UKREP Brussels in 1981 and the British Embassy in Madrid from 1986 – 1993, where she was First Secretary and deputy head of the Economic Department). She returned to the UK in 1993 to become Regional Director at MAFF's Anglian Region, returning to HQ in 1997 as Head of Food and Drink Industry Division.

In May 2001 – shortly before the creation of Defra – she was appointed Director of Sustainable Development and Rural Affairs in the Government Office for the East of England, where her responsibilities reflected the span of Defra's departmental agenda, with a particular focus on sustainable development and rural issues. She worked closely with environmental and countryside organisations including the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and English Nature, taking a particular interest in initiatives aimed at promoting a vibrant rural economy which respects and builds on the Region's rich natural heritage.

Jane married Raymond Cross in July 2004 and took early retirement from the Civil Service in March 2005 to spend more time with her new family. Her interests include nature and the environment, horses and riding (she has a particular interest in the Spanish or Andalusian Horse), narrow-boating and the theatre. She has lived in Cambridgeshire since 1993.