

# **The Deer Initiative**

## **Deer, Habitats and Impacts Conference March 2007**

### **Conference Introduction**

*Peter Watson – Director, The Deer Initiative*

I would like to start by thanking John Robb for his supportive address and for all the support that his Department have given us over the last few years. As Jane said I am the Executive Director of the Deer Initiative Limited, the charitable company limited by guarantee that supports the Partnership to achieve the aim of 'ensuring the delivery of a sustainable, well-managed wild deer population in England and Wales.

We have come a long way since I stood here at the last conference talking about the future of deer management in England. But I would make no bones about the fact that I believe we still have a very long way to go, if we are to achieve the vision set out by Andrew Hoon, Jane's predecessor who is with us here today and did much in the early days to put us in a position to tackle the future challenge.

This morning I would like to give you a broad overview of the work of the staff of DI Ltd which I hope will serve as a link to many of the presentations you will hear later in the conference and give you a flavour of the wide range of work we are involved in.

As Jane said in her introduction the key to achieving success in any of our work is the involvement and awareness of local landowners and land managers and working with a wide range of partners to promote collaborative deer management at a landscape scale. Without the support of the Partners and our expert consultants the small staff of DI Ltd would not be able to achieve our aim. In my presentation I will highlight how the staff and the Partners are working together at both a national and local level. I am not going to dwell on our role of providing advice though we continue to be involved at all levels in supporting the Partners, outside organisations and Government at all levels with advice on a wide range of deer management related issues.

The current structure of DI Ltd is shown on this slide and though I am not going to discuss the governance of DI Ltd, you should note that the Trustees, who are unpaid, come from a range of our Partners and their support alone represents a significant in-kind contribution from the private sector.

The current staffing of the company comes directly from our role in supporting the Defra Wild Deer Action Plan that John mentioned earlier and the Regional structure is to an extent dictated by the priorities of our major funders; Defra, Natural England and the Forestry Commission. The obvious gap is in the north of England and this is a simple reflection of funding constraints. There is much work to be done in the north but unless further funding is available either at a national or regional level we will be unable to provide a full time presence in the region.

To maximise the support that DI Ltd is able to give each of the regional DLOs also has a specialism shown on this slide and you will hear more about work in each of these areas during the conference.

Jonathan Spencer will be talking about improving native biodiversity and the SSSI programme and Steve Cresswell will give you a presentation about one of our longer running projects but as this slide shows in collaboration with NE and FC, last year, we identified a number of national Woodland SSSI Priority areas in which we are targeting resources to attain the most cost effective improvement in woodland condition over the next 3 years and the Central Eastern and South Eastern DLOs are committed to spending at least 50% of their time working on this issue.

We believe that the model that Steve will describe of a public/private partnership can bring about real change in deer management at a landscape scale and thus achieve an improvement in the woodland SSSIs or tackle any other deer management issue in the area. This model is based on an integrated approach addressing some or all of the areas shown on this slide. The key to the project was gaining increased local and regional awareness of deer, their impacts and the need for their management among private and public sector landowners. By doing this we increased collaboration between landowners and gained their agreement to carry out more effective landscape scale deer management resulting in a significant targeted increase in collaborative culling activities to reduce deer impacts.

Wherever we are working, we achieve this with FC and NE funding support, to address the practical problems facing the landowners and their deer managers or stalkers. We do this by providing infrastructure, including high seats, refrigerated trailers and even portable larders where required. We also provide support to collaborative culling operations through our DMGs including if necessary, loan and delivery of equipment, carcass collection and even subsidised venison prices.

This approach has a number of other benefits including an increased awareness and a coordinated approach to Deer Vehicle Collisions; and greater engagement with, and training of, local deer stalkers and successfully promoting the benefits of wild venison to the catering trade and public.

One of the key elements of our work is that of monitoring and John touched on an increasing need for such monitoring. We focus on 2 elements in all the areas in which we work. Firstly we monitor local deer densities using the latest methods, We have recently purchased 2 modern thermal imagers manufactured by FLIR who are represented here today and this video gives an indication of the quality of our results. These are linked to a GIS which allows us to plot our sightings and establish deer densities. We continue to also monitor the condition of SSSIs in all our project areas since there is an inevitable time lag between a reduction in deer densities and the recovery of the woodland. But also to ensure that the work we are carrying out is achieving the desired effect. We use both enclosures shown here and Dr Arnie Cooke's method of monitoring deer activity and impacts. In addition we are supported by Forest Research who have carried out a detailed survey of over 80 of our priority woodlands.

All of this work is based on Best Practice which the Partnership is developing for England and Wales with significant help from the Deer Commission for Scotland. Ian Forshaw and Jamie Cordery will give a presentation on progress later in the conference.

Turning to deer vehicle collisions: I would like to start by recording our gratitude to the work of Jochen Langbein with whom we have been working for over 5 years and to Rory Putman for his work on our behalf in Scotland. Without their determination and meticulous work I suspect the Deer Vehicle Collision issue would continue to be under recognised.

We have included in your pack an advance summary of our research report on Deer Vehicle collisions produced on behalf of the Highways Agency. Road traffic accidents involving deer have presented a major and under-recognised problem in Britain for many years. Increases in both the numbers and distribution of deer in Britain, combined with a continuing rise in traffic volume, means that this problem will continue to worsen unless action is taken now. Until we began work on behalf of the Highways Agency, there was no system for central collection of data on road traffic accidents involving deer. This lack of information has posed a major handicap to effective management of deer on our roads. Tony Sangwine will talk about the future but we have now collected reports on over 30,000 Deer-Vehicle Collisions (DVCs) occurring in Britain over a 5 year period. Our sources included our Partners, the Police, Local Authorities, Motor Insurance Companies and many others.

*Our data provides a far larger sample of DVCs than has been available to any previous assessment of the issue in Britain.* It is clear however, that even our large annual samples of incidents represent merely a small proportion (most likely less than 20%) of all deer road kills or related incidents nationwide. We believe that *the true toll of DVCs may well exceed 60,000 per year in England alone, and 74,000 for Britain.*

The summary in your pack shows the distribution of the collisions we have recorded and highlights the widespread nature of the issue and some of the hotspots we have identified.

I do not want to steal Tony's thunder so I will not dwell on the detail of our findings but I would highlight the fact that *the vast number of deer injured or killed in traffic incidents every year probably presents the single greatest welfare issue for wild deer in Britain.*

From an animal welfare perspective a more important concern than the overall numbers of deer killed through DVCs are those deer which are not killed instantly, but which instead may suffer for prolonged periods from their injuries until a suitably qualified person can attend to humanely dispatch them. Many others may run off to suffer or die of their injuries later. It seems likely that *the overall toll of severely injured deer which are not killed outright exceeds 8,500 in England and over 10,000 for Britain.*

You will hear more from both Tony and Robbie Kernahan about potential mitigation measures but there are a number of new types of mitigation have recently been brought onto the market for example novel types of digital signage activated by animals at the roadside and/or speed of approaching vehicles and we *are now carrying out a number of practical trials in England to evaluate some of these newer forms of deterrent and as in all the work we do monitoring plays a vital role. This video shows the first footage of deer reaction to Ecopillars in operation and though it is too early to draw scientific conclusions we can at least see a visible reaction from the deer to the acoustic warning produced by*

*the pillar. This work highlights our commitment to ensuring all our work is monitored in a scientific way to ensure we have sound evidence on which to base future management and advice.*

It is clear from our work so far that DVCs in Britain represent a serious and increasing problem in terms of human injury, the economic costs of damage and the welfare of deer.

It is clear that there is no single mitigation measure that will significantly reduce the number of Deer Vehicle Collisions. But we believe that a combination of actions will start to reduce the toll of human and animal casualties.

We now believe that *immediate action should be taken to implement remedial measures in the hot-spots we have identified*, using the combined resources of the Deer Initiative Partnership and other agencies.

And in what I think is an exciting development we are working with the Road Angel Group to develop an in-car warning for drivers approaching deer accident black-spots. We are convinced that raising driver awareness is a key requirement and this is a first attempt at involving the commercial sector in our work. Stephen Wilson of Road Angel Group is here today and will be demonstrating some of their products in the intervals. *We are also recommending a wider campaign to raise driver awareness of the risk of DVCs and the instigation of an efficient nationally agreed system to deal with casualty deer*

Finally looking briefly at wild deer disease surveillance.

Last year we took on the additional task of assisting Defra in the coordination of national disease surveillance in wild deer. A DLO in the SW was appointed in April 2005 with funding from Defra to develop a role as a focal point for information on disease in wild deer particularly Bovine tuberculosis (Btb). In addition to the national communication role DI Ltd has assisted Defra and the State Veterinary Service in establishing local sampling in Btb hotspots and training stalkers to ensure that the sampling is effective. Andy Paterson will talk in detail about this work tomorrow but by way of introduction I will just say that we started this work in 2005 in the SW of England with support from the Forestry Commission and the National Trust and extended the work last winter to include the Cotswolds with the support of local private landowners and the National Gamekeepers Organisation.

In conclusion,

It is clear that there are challenging times ahead and we will need to take a broad view of deer management and that increasing flexibility required and expected by both the public and private sector. Jane has already mentioned funding. The work we do requires funding and whilst the private sector provides vital in kind and limited financial support we believe that we will inevitably require financial support from Government if we are to achieve Government's own challenging targets. We recognise that the key to future long term funding is to ensure that DI Ltd adds value to the Partnership and that we operate in an efficient and cost effective manner but we are convinced that the DI Partnership supported by DI Ltd offers the best and most cost effective mechanism for 'ensuring the delivery of a sustainable well managed wild deer population in England and Wales.

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**Speaker's biography**

Peter joined the Deer Initiative in 2001 as the Central Region Deer Liaison Officer and technical advisor; he has been the Executive Director since October 2004. Prior to joining the DI he was the BASC Deer Officer for 5 years. During that time he was involved in setting up Deer Management Qualifications and was a Trustee of the Deer Initiative. He joined BASC following a mid-career break during which he completed a degree in ecology at the University of Stirling to build in a long term interest in wild deer and their habitats.