

The Deer Initiative

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Marches Deer Project (formerly the Heartwoods Deer Project)

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The purpose of this presentation is to outline the rationale and reasons for the development of the Marches (formerly Heartwoods) deer project. The report describes the reason for the creation of the project, the initial aspirations, and achievements to date and how the work already undertaken can be consolidated and taken forward.

Summary

This project was initiated to catalyse deer management in order to improve the condition of deer impacted woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the West Midlands region. The decline of these woodlands is most likely to have occurred during the 20th century as has the increase in deer numbers and impacts.

This presentation focuses on the National Priority SSSI areas around Wyre and Bredon near Worcester and Hereford, especially the Dinmore Hill and Woolhope Dome DMG areas where we have worked since 2002.

Dinmore Hill: The A49 Trunk road bisects it (long testing of road casualties, deer and cars, 40-50 to 0 last year, 15 the year before). This may have been partly due to displacement following increased cull.

The SSSI's in the area are in unfavourable improving and declining. The area includes a Forest Park run by the County Council and Moccas Park. A mixture of ancient woodland, other woodlands, and farmed land create a complex of interlocking land / food. The fallow herd in the area comes from the two parks - Hampton Court and Moccas Park. Incidentally, in the early 1950s, it is reported that the County Agricultural Executive Committee in Dinmore culled upwards of 100 annually in organised deer drives.

Woolhope Dome: This has the same complexity of land use and ownership, including a large FE Holding (Designation of Haugh SSSI is not primarily for woodland but for invertebrates. Original estimates of deer numbers was 35 per Km² but as we got more involved and collected better information we found that this original estimate could be trebled.

The fundamental reasons that deer are now at unsustainable levels in the project area are;

- Woodlands are no longer intensively managed and therefore neither are they well protected against deer and other mammals because there are few financial incentives to do so.
- The culture of rural life has changed and deer are no longer hunted intensively for food.
- There is very little awareness or knowledge of the impacts and effects of deer.
- Deer, particularly fallow are difficult to manage unless there is close and active collaboration between landowners.
- The increase in recreational stalking potentially encouraged by national shooting organisations has led to stalkers jealously “collecting” and guarding areas of land and actively allowing numbers of deer to build up in order to improve their “sport”. There is also an alarming spread of species which have been previously unseen in the area which can only have occurred by human intervention such as roe and muntjac.
- Deer populations, even if they are being culled, at current rates are likely to double in 10 years. If they are in an area which is not being culled they can double in numbers in 2 years, therefore unless the pressure is kept on, the problem of damage to SSSIs will increase

The overall task:

- Effective management of expanding deer numbers is essential to the conservation value of woodland SSSIs and ancient semi-natural woodland.
- As deer cannot be managed in isolation, the project looked at managing the deer across their entire herd range (particularly as fallow was the main species).

Desired outcomes:

- Improve understanding of our aims.
- Support the joint working of those already active in the management of deer. To do this we needed to collect these together and form them into a DMG.
- Have some published information to explain our cause, to combat public concern re our culling operations
- Provide evidence on the direction of change in the SSSI's by monitoring of the impacts on woodland vegetation of deer in the Dinmore and Woolhope DMG areas.

Achievements to date:

Through joint working and funding (£20K per annum plus in-kind support from local landowners)

- The involvement of a part-time local co-ordinator to liaise with local landowners and stakeholders. The value of a local co-ordinator is that they are seen as an expert in the field of deer management with no reason for a personal agenda to be followed in this location.
- Attendance and input to DMG meetings for the 4 areas and liaison with ‘key players’ and owners, occupiers, agents, to gain ‘ownership’.
- Assistance with annual census and collation of results.

- Purchase and distribution of high seats and organisation of collaborative culls resulting in an increase from 70 to 340. This increase has largely come from the new owner at the centre of this area.

Obstacles:

- Lack of interest in overall woodland management
- Lack of political will to protect vulnerable sites or enforce wildlife legislation.
- Recreational stalkers who wish to keep deer numbers high.
- Landowners who are already shooting deer on their land and feel there is no need for increased culling or co-operation with neighbours.
- Landowners who have an existing deer manager who “has the situation under control”.
- Landowners where the game shooting interests preclude effective engagement in deer management
- Landowners who are funded by public subscription who do not manage deer effectively because doing so may alienate or displease their members.

Overcoming some of these obstacles:

There appears to be a limited level of understanding of the priority SSSI woodland:

- The reason for SSSI designation
- The importance of the site
- The impact of deer
- The importance of effective management

There may be a greater role we can play in information exchange with land managers to understand the value of their sites. We thus produced a leaflet entitled “Management of Deer n Herefordshire” to try to get this message across.

It is also essential to engage with the right stakeholders, particularly those with controlling interests.

- DMGs made up mainly of recreational stalkers usually bring their own private interests and agendas to the group.
- When the Dinmore DMG was established there was suspicion that the DI would bring in professional stalkers for a large scale cull.
- While stalker-led or stalker-dominated groups have disadvantages they can still function well with the right leadership / guidance
- Landowner / land-manager dominated groups are more likely to make progress as they have greater interests at stake.

The Project’s Future

The important activities to concentrate future work on are:

- Ongoing engagement with DMGs and interested groups
- Ongoing surveys of deer distribution, densities and impacts

- Information transfer to landowners and managers
- Continue to take advantage of opportunities as they arise

Remaining obstacles:

- Lack of landowner interest in managing deer effectively
- Lack of landowner interest in sustainably managing woodlands and other habitats effectively.
- Too much land where deer are either not culled at all or not culled effectively
- Ill-informed public perception that managing wild deer is cruel and unnecessary and that it is wrong to kill any wild animal despite the negative impacts they have upon their environment.

Conclusion

- Explain potential of habitats / reason for designation
- Address perceived obstacles that prevent engagement
- Take opportunities when they arise
- Don't under estimate the time and resource it takes to build capacity and understanding
- Remember there will always be deer hot spots
- Collaborative working requires flexibility, local input and preparation

The project shows that collaborative land management for deer is possible if we employ the lessons learnt thus far and continue to adapt.

Speaker's biography

Steve first joined the Forestry Commission in the Lake District in 1988.

Forest management was the task and in those days establishment of the forest which involved dealing with deer and a few sheep of course. He moved to the North York Moors sometime after and tried his hand at growing transplants in Wykeham Nursery. He then took on the management of Cropton Forest before specialising as a private woodland officer in 1992

He moved to Severn Wye and Avon, now the West Midlands Conservancy, in 1996 where he manages the grant aid and licensing functions of the Forestry Commission.

This work brings him back close to that original task of ensuring the regeneration of forests, which still involves deer and sometimes sheep.