

# **The Deer Initiative**

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

### **Living with deer: an alternative view of deer management**

*Richard Smithers, UK Conservation Adviser, Woodland Trust*

Deer are an important part of our wildlife, which people enjoy seeing but they can have a range of negative impacts on the environment, including: preventing the growth of young trees or coppice re-growth by browsing, fraying or bark stripping; selective grazing of bluebells, oxlips and other woodland flowers by some species; damaging crops where they occur in large numbers.

Deer are often cited as a cause of woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest being in unfavourable condition. However, despite the strength of concern expressed by some people about the scale of the threat posed to biodiversity by deer, evidence of negative impacts at all but a site scale (e.g. at Monks Wood, Cambridgeshire and Wytham Wood, Oxford) is equivocal. For example, the recent Bunce report identified that increased grazing was correlated with increased ground flora species-richness. Similarly, whilst the recent Repeat Woodland Bird Survey suggested that changes in woodland structure were the most likely driver for many of the bird declines, they were not correlated with deer data. In both cases, it may be that the variables recorded, or the way in which they were observed, was inadequate for the purposes of analysis. However, one might equally draw the conclusion that concerns in relation to deer may be a result of local rather than general issues and that different deer species have different impacts.

Relationships between deer densities and deer impacts at a landscape-scale especially in the lowlands seem to be particularly poorly researched and understanding of the impact of interactions between deer species and with other wild and domestic grazers is only in its infancy. The same could also be said to be true of some of the potentially beneficial impacts of deer, such as their purported role in longer distance dispersal of other species. However, there is agreement in the literature that intermediate levels of grazing/browsing are probably most beneficial, although clearly this may vary dependent on the key features of a site.

While sustained control at anything other than a very local level (e.g. individual sites or estates) has not been achieved, it is worthy of note that red, sika and fallow deer are herding species, which could enable effective control or eradication if landowners were of a like mind. However, roe and muntjac are not gregarious, which leads many to contend that even if there is a will there will not be a way to sustain their effective control at anything other than a site level.

The Woodland Trust recognises that deer are an important part of our natural heritage. In managing deer we aim to strike a balance between deer numbers and the wider needs of the woodland environment. With this in mind the Trust co-operates with our neighbours and local Deer Management Groups and produces

management plans for its properties containing prescriptions to minimise deer damage where they have a negative impact on our woods. These provide for the control of deer where necessary and where such measures can be sustained for so long as the risk of damage continues

The Woodland Trust's Native Species Conservation Position Statement (2005) states: *When considering the need to control a species, its native or non-native status is unimportant. The key issue is whether it is causing significant ongoing habitat change or loss of other species, additional to that from climate change.* Thus, the Woodland Trust believes that although it is easy to get drawn down a route of considering muntjac, sika and fallow and Chinese water deer, which are non-native, rather differently from red and roe deer, which are native, the same principles should underpin the management of all deer species.

In a wider context, the Woodland Trust supports those neighbours and landowners who manage deer on their estates in a similar manner to the Trust. In essence, the Woodland Trust believes that landowners should: ensure clarity of management objectives for their property; consider deer on a site by site basis; optimise deer impacts through appropriate woodland management (given that impacts may be both beneficial and detrimental); cooperate with local Deer Management Groups; only use humane methods of control; take account of the conservation interests of the wider area.

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### **Speaker's biography**

Richard is the Woodland Trust's UK Conservation Adviser, appointed in 1998, providing strategic support on conservation issues and managing involvement in conservation research. He joined the Trust in 1988 as a site manager and has undertaken a wide range of roles; managing a number of the Trust's regions, advising on its acquisition and woodland management programmes and setting up the Trust's Grants Unit. Richard graduated from Sheffield University in Animal & Plant Biology in 1983 and managed a conservation project in West Africa for two years, returning to supervise Hampshire County Council's Countryside Survey Unit before joining the Woodland Trust.