

A stylized illustration of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a large reddish-brown deer is shown in profile, looking right. Below it, a smaller grey deer with white spots is looking forward. In the middle ground, a person in a dark green jacket and hat is walking on a dark brown hillside, carrying a long staff or pole. To the right, there are stylized trees with dark brown trunks and foliage in shades of red and green. The background is a solid dark green color.

Deer and people

Why effective deer management is an essential part of building a robust future for rural communities and wildlife in Scotland

We have a deer management problem in Scotland

There are nearly **one million wild deer** in Scotland, **at least double** the number a healthy landscape can sustain. At the same time, there is a shortage of qualified, well-paid stalkers able to help manage these populations.

We need action now for

The climate emergency



Catastrophic overgrazing



This is preventing the expansion of native woodland, and the recovery of wildlife species.

The biodiversity crisis



Ecological restoration



How did we get here?

High numbers have been encouraged by sports shooting estates for private interests for years. This comes at the expense of almost all other species.

Deer have no natural predators left in the UK.



Deer are browsers, and feed on grass, tree shoots and shrubs. This means that native woodland, in areas of high deer density, struggles to expand. Some are even shrinking, because new shoots are eaten before they've had a chance to grow.

Why does it matter?

Woodlands

- Native woodlands cover just **4% of Scotland's total land area**, the European average is 38%.
- Scotland has no natural tree line, which means we are missing an entire habitat. The tree line is a habitat at the edge of where trees are able to grow due to altitude and exposure.
- Scotland's woodlands and forests currently only absorb a fraction of the carbon capture possible through nature restoration. Restored woods and peatland **could soak up a third of Scotland's annual emissions**.
- **One in nine species in Scotland are at risk of extinction**, many of which need native woodland for food and shelter. This includes iconic species such as red squirrels, Scottish wildcats, and capercaillie.

Welfare

- Deer themselves need woodland to survive. People's desire for artificially high deer numbers means that thousands of animals suffer and die in winter without access to suitable food and shelter.

Wider society

- Artificially high deer numbers carry significant social and economic costs, such as damage to forestry and agriculture, increased road accidents, and the proliferation of disease-bearing ticks.



What's the solution?

Deer culling

To help achieve a greener and fairer Scotland, there needs to be increased employment opportunities for competent deer stalkers; supporting secure salaries, and involving more people (and a more diverse group of people) in helping manage deer in Scotland.

In line with many other estates in the Highlands, the John Muir Trust will increase cull targets on the land it looks after in the coming years. Overall deer populations need to be reduced significantly.

Longer term, the Trust aims to reduce deer densities to a level that allows for widespread habitat recovery. We recognise that deer are an iconic species and a really important part of woodland ecology. The aim is to restore a balance in our landscape. The Trust is communicating these plans to neighbours.

For specific updates on deer management in different areas, visit the Trust website.

johnmuirtrust.org/deer





What are the local benefits?

Inclusive culture

We believe deer management should be community-led, with benefits for wider society, not just a few individuals. **Our highland sporting heritage should be open to everyone.**

That's why the John Muir Trust has invested in a community deer larder at Glencanisip in the Highlands, and will continue to support community deer stalking projects such as Hill to Grill and the Women's Stalking Project.

Job opportunities

Comprehensive deer management will require more skilled deer managers, not less. Supporting a local skilled workforce can contribute towards vibrant local communities.

Access to food

There are opportunities to promote and provide premium, ethical, local venison for a healthy, low-carbon meat. Venison carries a far lower carbon footprint than beef from intensively reared cattle. There are other welfare positives too - deer are free range, have lived a relatively low stress life, and have not required any medication or antibiotics. Venison is also lower in fat and calories, and provides larger iron intake per serving than beef.

Can areas of woodland be fenced off for protection instead?

Deer are an important part of the woodland ecosystem when it is in balance, and need the shelter that woodlands provide - so fencing off woodland prevents access when deer need it most. Deer fences are visually intrusive in the landscape and can be a barrier to public access. They also create a sterile environment, as they don't allow for important woodland fringe habitats to flourish. Fences can also lead to bird deaths from collisions, and deer trying to jump fences in desperation for food can also get caught. They are costly; financially and to the environment. Deer fencing costs around £15 per metre and currently the majority of fencing is financed through grants from the taxpayer. It also requires miles of galvanised steel and needs continual repairs and replacing after 20 years.

Could large predators be introduced to manage deer?

The reintroduction of large predators such as lynx and wolves would indeed have an impact on deer numbers. However, it would only be possible to bring back these species with national public and political support and, crucially, with community support in the relevant local and regional areas. Even then, reintroductions would need to be phased in over a prolonged period, and therefore would not be sufficient on their own to reduce Scotland's deer numbers to sustainable levels. At least in the short-to-medium term, human management of deer would still be essential.

Could non-lethal methods of controlling deer (e.g. immuno-contraception) be used?

This option is not currently practical at this scale. Immuno-contraception is only viable when dealing with small captive herds of deer. It involves capturing and injecting hinds annually, or less reliably, firing contraceptive darts. It would be impractical to apply this method on a national scale across rough, mountainous and remote uplands, with a scattered, mobile deer hind population.

What happens to deer carcasses that are not extracted?

As with any wild animal that has died, its nutrients return to the soil and support a rich ecosystem and healthy biodiversity. A proportion of the carcass has always been left on the hill, whether it be the intestines, other internal organs or the entire animal. Where extraction of the carcass is difficult, dangerous or carries a significant carbon impact to remove (for example with a vehicle), it is left on the hill. Stalkers may choose to take home the prime cuts at their discretion.

Find out more:

johnmuirtrust.org/deer

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