

# The sustainable management of wild deer populations in England:

## An action plan





## Foreword

"Wild deer, especially native species, are an important and valued part of England's natural heritage but at the same time they can have a number of impacts upon habitats and biodiversity.

The rapidly increasing wild deer population is having, in some local areas, a negative effect on some of England's landscape and wildlife, as well as disturbing rural activities like farming and woodland management.

Defra and the Forestry Commission aim to achieve with this new strategy the sustainable management of wild deer in England so that we can enhance our countryside, reduce the damage created by over grazing but allow wild deer to continue to be a key part of our rich landscape.

In recent years a number of partners, both public and voluntary, have been working increasingly closely together, locally and nationally, to develop improved deer management. This Action Plan brings together for the first time a clear strategy for the Defra family which will encourage and support the careful and effective management of wild deer.

We are committed to ensuring that we deliver a healthy and sustainable deer population, in balance with the needs of wildlife and those who live and work in rural England. "

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ben Bradshaw'.

**Ben Bradshaw MP**

Minister for Nature Conservation

## Introduction

This document sets out actions which the Defra family of organisations (Defra, Forestry Commission, English Nature, The Countryside Agency) intend to take over the next 3 years, in order to encourage and support the sustainable management of wild deer in England.

## The Impact of Wild Deer in England

There are 6 species of wild deer in England. Red and roe deer are native; fallow, sika, muntjac and Chinese water deer are introduced species.

Populations of wild deer have been increasing rapidly in the last 40 years and may now be higher than at any time in the last 1000 years. There is considerable and increasing evidence of some negative impacts of deer at various localities across the country.

These include:

- Damage to semi-natural habitats and biodiversity values;
- Damage to woodland plants and additional costs of protecting trees from deer;
- Road traffic accidents, some of which result in human injuries or fatalities;
- Infection with diseases which can affect farm livestock and in some cases humans;
- Agricultural and horticultural crop damage;
- Damage to gardens.



Collisions of vehicles with deer are a major problem, with around 40,000 incidents occurring annually in the UK alone.

Red and roe deer are part of our natural environment, and all deer can play a positive role; we gain pleasure from seeing deer in the countryside, and some habitats are improved or maintained by deer activity. In addition, deer management and venison processing and marketing can support rural jobs and businesses.

## Native and Introduced Deer

There are particular problems arising from the introduction of non-native wildlife, however the negative and positive aspects of deer need to be considered regardless of their origin. Some of the roe and red deer populations in England have been derived from non-native stock. Hybridisation between red and sika deer has been occurring, and is likely to continue wherever the two species come into contact. Unless properly managed this could ultimately involve all red and sika populations on mainland Britain.

The issue of managing non-native species is complex and wide-ranging. Although non-native species can bring real problems, they can give rise to benefits to society. Some species, like fallow deer, are part of our cultural heritage. It is important to develop a proportionate response to the issue and to take account of a wide range of views in developing a long-term strategy. It is difficult to identify a particular management policy that should be applied uniquely to the introduced species, or any species in particular. Preserving genetically native populations, for instance of red deer, is important.

## What do we mean by Sustainable Management?

Our aim is to ensure a well-managed and healthy wild deer population in England, which presents no threat to long-term environmental, social, or economic sustainability, and to limit, as far as practicable, further spread of the recently introduced non-native species.

Whether populations are at a sustainable level, and what management is needed, can only be assessed at a regional or local "whole landscape" level. Any assessment should involve all the people whose lives are influenced by deer.

## What is the Role of Government?

Government has a number of crucial roles:

- Commitment to conserving and enhancing native biodiversity;
- Making legislation relating to deer management;
- Co-ordinating and supporting provision of advice;
- Supporting education and training, especially assessment standards;
- Raising public awareness;
- Setting venison and food standards;
- Carrying out research;
- Providing grant support for landowners;
- Practising exemplary management of deer on public estate land;
- Establishing policy on non-native and native species.

However, primary responsibility for deer management lies with landowners and deer managers.

## The Action Plan

The Defra family of organisations will take a number of actions to work towards achieving the sustainable management of wild deer in England over the next three years:

### Ensuring High Quality Co-ordinated Advice

The Defra family will co-ordinate a range of sources of objective and authoritative advice on best practice in the management of wild deer:

The Deer Initiative was established in 1995 and has built upon a partnership approach to reduce the adverse environmental and economic impact of wild deer, through advice and support. Following an independent evaluation in 2004, the Defra family will continue to fund the Deer Initiative for at least another three years, agreeing priorities, in order to:

- Provide advice on co-operative deer management throughout England;
- Focus effort in establishing and supporting Deer Management groups in priority areas;
- Facilitate regional Outreach Seminars on achieving sustainable management of deer populations.

While participating fully in the Deer Initiative's work, members of the Defra family will also continue to provide objective and authoritative advice on the management of wild deer; specialising in the following areas:

- Defra European Wildlife will be responsible for native and non-native species policy;
- The Defra Veterinary Services (The Animal Health and Welfare Directorate, the State Veterinary Service and the Veterinary Laboratories Agency), will provide advice and information on disease recognition and surveillance, statutory notification, and animal welfare legislation;
- Forestry Commission England and Forest Research will advise on woodland deer management, population estimation and impact assessments, and woodland deer fencing and damage prevention. They will share experience in carcass handling, and larder design and use. Forestry Commission Training Services offer a Woodland Deer Management Course;
- English Nature will advise on biodiversity generally, but particularly with respect to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs);
- The Rural Development Service will provide general advice to farmers, conservation organisations, and the general public on legal methods of both resolving and avoiding deer problems. They will advise Defra on statutory issues relating to notices under the Agriculture Act 1947, and licences under the proposed new provisions in the legislation.

### Improving the Laws on Deer

The number of deer, their distribution and impact has changed over the years. Having taken account of the responses to our consultation in spring 2004, the Defra family will make a number of changes to modernise and update the law on deer management:

- Where possible, alter the Deer Act 1991 to allow permitted weapons and ammunition, dates of close seasons, and species and sexes of deer to which certain parts of the Act applies, to be listed in statutory instruments, and therefore be more easily updated when needed;
- Revise Schedule 2 of the Deer Act 1991 with respect to the smaller deer species, to allow use of some of the .22 centre fire calibres, (this is already permitted in Scotland for roe deer), and should be safe and humane for the smaller deer species. It is intended to stipulate the species and firearms/ammunition that this will apply to, using statutory instruments. At present it is envisaged it will apply to Muntjac and Chinese water deer only, and the ballistics will be those allowed in Scotland for roe deer;
- Revise Section 6 of the Deer Act 1991, with regards to actions taken to prevent suffering, in line with the Scottish legislation; such that a person shall not be guilty of an offence in respect of any act done for the purpose of preventing suffering;



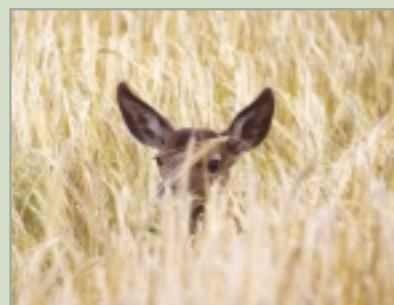
Deer are kept in many parks for their aesthetic appeal and may become accustomed to people, provided dogs are kept on leads.



Fitting radio-collars to some wild deer helps researchers gain a better understanding of how far deer range and use their habitats.

- Introduce provisions in the Deer Act to permit licensed shooting during the close season, to allow action to be taken for preserving public health and safety (for instance on airfields) or for the purpose of preventing serious damage to any form of property or the natural environment. Licences should only be granted on a case by case basis where necessary and if other reasonable control methods have been found to be ineffective or impracticable. RDS or the new integrated agency is likely to be the licensing authority;
- Introduce provisions to permit licensed shooting at night for the purpose of preventing serious damage to any form of property or the natural environment. Licences should only be granted on a case by case basis where necessary, and if other reasonable control methods have been found to be ineffective or are impractical. RDS or the new integrated agency is likely to be the licensing authority;
- Move the start of the doe/hind close season in England and Wales to 15 March. This will enhance opportunities for control, and takes account of consultation responses favouring a spring extension over an autumn one;
- Introduce a close season for both sexes of Chinese water deer, from 15 March to 31 October. This will improve the welfare of dependant fawns, but will need to be applied to both sexes since they can be difficult to distinguish;
- Alter the wording of the legislation so that the close season for both sexes of the parent species apply to hybrid animals as well as pure breeds, unless explicitly exempted. In line with this, leave the close season for sika stags unaltered, and ensure red/sika hybrid stags are covered by the same close season as red stags in order to protect red stags which may not be easily distinguished from hybrids in the field;
- Consider adding Chinese water deer (CWD) to Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, so that releasing this species into the wild will be an offence. [A consultation on all species listed on the Schedules of the WCA 1981 is due to take place in 2005]. Defra also intends to consider an exception to allow for the immediate release of CWD at the site of capture where there is no practical means of humane dispatch;
- Consider amending Game Acts to allow the sale of venison throughout the year;
- Consider opportunities to clarify the Deer Act regarding shooting from mechanically propelled vehicles, to make it clear that it is intended to prohibit shooting deer from a vehicle whilst the engine is running, or the vehicle is in motion.

Our timetable will be largely dictated by available legislative time in Parliament but we hope to implement some of these changes by the end of 2006.



Deer browsing at high density can cause significant damage to agricultural crops.

## Training and Education

High quality training and education are essential for safe, humane and effective management of deer. The Defra family will:

- Recognise that voluntary training/ learning plays a major role in the training of deer managers/ stalkers;
- Continue to support the competencies set by LANTRA, as the industry standard;
- Continue to work with LANTRA in revising National Occupational Standards for game handling;
- Explore ways to improve and consolidate standards of assessment for stalkers and deer;
- Work with the FSA and LANTRA to explore accreditation of assessment to European standards, in the context of meeting the EU hygiene regulations;
- Require high standards for stalking on public land;
- Seek to raise public awareness of the benefits of responsible management of wild deer populations;

## Disease Control

The evidence available so far suggests that deer are unlikely to be a significant source of spread for the main livestock diseases, although the level of monitoring in deer has been low. Monitoring of deer for bovine TB through statutory submissions is ongoing. There may be an increased risk of TB in wild deer, where they are concentrated as a result of supplementary feeding. The level of risk also varies between deer species. Deer are also involved in the transmission of Lyme's disease to humans, although pheasants and small mammals are now thought to be the main reservoirs. The Defra family will:

- Produce a strategy for government's involvement in the monitoring and surveillance of diseases in deer;
- Ensure that deer issues are included in flexible Disease Contingency plans when necessary;
- Support a new Deer Initiative "Deer Liaison Officer" in South West England, part of whose role will include a national remit to assist disease surveillance in deer – particularly with regard to TB;
- Support the inclusion of carcass inspection as part of stalker assessment through LANTRA, including responsibilities regarding Notifiable Diseases;
- Discourage supplementary feeding which may lead to artificial concentrations of wild deer;
- Collate information on the regional incidence of Lyme's disease;
- Clarify carcass waste and by-product disposal issues, and disseminate guidance through the Deer Initiative.

## Venison Market

Venison sales support deer management activities and form part of the rural economy. The Defra family will:

- Clarify the potential for supporting marketing initiatives under the Rural Enterprise Scheme, and seek to ensure that such support is available under successor schemes;
- Encourage and support the creation and improvement of deer larders, including encouraging the collaborative use of facilities;
- Develop the market for wild venison, building on the work of the Countryside Agency's "Eat the View" initiative;
- Assess the impact of an increased amount of wild venison available for sale in the UK and abroad and the scope for promotion of wild venison in the wider market;
- Work with the FSA on public health and hygiene issues, including EU hygiene regulations.

## Research, Evaluation and Monitoring

There is a considerable need to develop our understanding of wild deer, and the best methods of management for a sustainable population. The Defra family will:

- Work with the Highways Agency and the Deer Initiative, to continue with their research and ongoing monitoring of Road Traffic Accidents involving deer;
- Continue research into current deer management techniques;
- Explore measures, which minimise or mitigate the impact of deer, including woodland planning, highway design and roadside planting;
- Explore the opportunities presented by novel research techniques such as immuno-contraception;
- Continue with present research into non-lethal methods, and be receptive to future initiatives. Defra recognises that novel non-lethal methods can be a valuable addition to lethal methods but are unlikely to replace them, in many situations;
- Commission a study into the effectiveness of deer management groups to inform best practice guidance;
- Continue and develop current work assessing the impact of deer on woodlands, taking opportunities provided by the National Inventory of Woods and Trees, and Farm Environment Plans;
- Encourage and support regional and local studies into the impacts of deer (see Regional Strategies below);
- Commission a study into the impacts of deer on woodland biodiversity values.



Bark stripping caused by fallow deer makes trees more susceptible to disease, and in severe cases may lead to their death.

© Jochem Langbein



## Linking Grants to Sustainable Deer Management

The Defra family will:

- Continue to support effective woodland management through their grant schemes, where deer are preventing the establishment of new woodland or adversely impacting on existing woodland;
- In particular, payments may be made through the Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) for effective deer management under the Woodland Management Grant and Woodland Improvement Grant components.



Roe buck in hardwood plantation

## Management of Public Estate Land

The Government is a significant landowner, and intends to continue to take the lead in best practice. The Defra family will:

- Continue to manage deer populations on public land at sustainable levels, ensuring best practice at all times;
- Continue to support and act as a catalyst for landscape scale collaborative deer management through Forestry Commission staff.

## Regional and Local Strategies

The assessment of sustainable deer population levels can only be made at regional and local levels, looking at the landscape in a holistic way. Where there is evidence of unsustainable deer populations, the Defra family will, mainly through the Deer Initiative:

- Encourage, facilitate and support the development of regional and local deer management strategies;
- Encourage as broad a partnership involvement as possible in the preparation of these strategies and action plans.

## Implementing and Reporting Progress

The Defra family organisations are committed to taking forward these actions over the next three years and will:

- Continue to fund the core costs of the Deer Initiative (DI) for a further three years, directed through the land management departments and agencies (Defra, Forestry Commission, and English Nature), reflecting the conservation, forestry and agricultural benefits of sustainable deer management;
- Funding to the DI will be increased, to ensure that full-time Deer Liaison Officers can be provided in at least three regions of England.

The Forestry Commission will take overall responsibility for ensuring that the actions are progressed and the Defra family will produce and publish a report on progress by the end of March 2008. In addition the Defra family will prepare short annual statements on progress to the Deer Initiative Partnership and seek their advice on how best to take the Action Plan forward. The Defra family will invite the DI Partnership to assess and comment on the March 2008 progress report.

**Defra and Forestry Commission England**

December 2004



**Forestry Commission England**  
National Office for England  
Great Eastern House  
Tenison Road  
Cambridge  
CB1 2DU  
t: 01223 314546  
f: 01223 460699  
e: [info@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:info@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)  
w: [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk)



**Wildlife Administration Unit**  
**DEFRA**  
Burghill Road  
Westbury-on-Trym  
Bristol  
BS10 6NJ  
t: 0845 601 4523 (local rate)  
f: 0845 601 3438  
e: [enquiries.southwest@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries.southwest@defra.gsi.gov.uk)  
w: [www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates)



**English Nature**  
Northminster House  
Peterborough  
PE1 1UA  
t: 01733 455100/101/102  
f: 01733 455103  
e: [enquiries@english-nature.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@english-nature.org.uk)  
w: [www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)



**The Countryside Agency**  
John Dower House  
Crescent Place  
Cheltenham  
Gloucestershire  
GL50 3RA  
t: 01242 521381  
f: 01242 584270  
e: [info@countryside.gov.uk](mailto:info@countryside.gov.uk)  
w: [www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)



**The Deer Initiative**  
PO Box 2196  
Wrexham  
LL14 6YH  
t: 0870 774 3677  
f: 0870 774 3688  
e: [admin@thedeerinitiative.co.uk](mailto:admin@thedeerinitiative.co.uk)  
w: [www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk](http://www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk)

**The Deer Initiative** is a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private interests dedicated to "ensuring the delivery of a sustainable, well-managed wild deer population in England and Wales".

The partners abide by the principles of the Deer Accord and encourage others to share their commitment and priorities as an integral part of their management of deer.

Cover photograph reproduced with kind permission from P Allman & H McMahon.  
Photography reproduced with kind permission from Jochen Langbein and Jamie Cordery.