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Striking the balance in deer management

Red deer are an important component of Scotland's biodiversity and are magnificent to see out on the hill. But with over 400,000 in the uplands, their presence can sometimes be problematic.

At Kirkton & Auchtertyre we have been a member of a Deer Management Group since 2005. This was established in recognition that high altitude species-rich grasslands, heaths and blanket bogs across the Breadalbane Hills were being damaged by overgrazing.



We have a small resident population of red deer located in a plantation above Tyndrum. But the majority of deer we need to control are young stags moving onto the farms from neighbouring estates. Deer on the farms are also controlled if they are browsing on trees within our woodlands or competing with our livestock's forage and fodder needs by grazing our inbye grasslands.

The numbers that need to be culled each year are too small to be a viable income source for us. So we are simply practicing pest control to protect valuable nature conservation or agricultural assets on the farms.

Across Scotland there is increasing recognition that Deer Management Group decisions need to be taken based on assessments of impacts on the vegetation, rather than primarily on the number of animals occurring within an area.

Assessing whether grazing is having an adverse impact on vegetation is relatively easy to do. What is much more difficult is being able to say how much of the impact is due to deer as opposed to other animals like sheep. The situation is complicated by the fact that some form of grazing pressure is actually needed to maintain much of the ground vegetation in Scotland's hills in good health.

This was one of the gaps in understanding highlighted in a study that we and colleagues in the University of the Highlands & Islands conducted for the Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland last year.

Rather than focus attention – as so often happens - solely on deer or sheep simply because one or the other is the predominant grazer in the landscape, there is a need to understand better how each are impacting on the vegetation - and when - in any particular location.

With that increased site-specific understanding, the question then becomes how best to change the adverse grazing patterns while still retaining the levels of grazing needed to maintain the desired characteristics of the vegetation under consideration.

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