



ExCASES Mission

# Seeing the Forest for the Deer

How stakeholder collaboration can improve  
landscape-scale deer management



University  
of Exeter



National Trust



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Environment  
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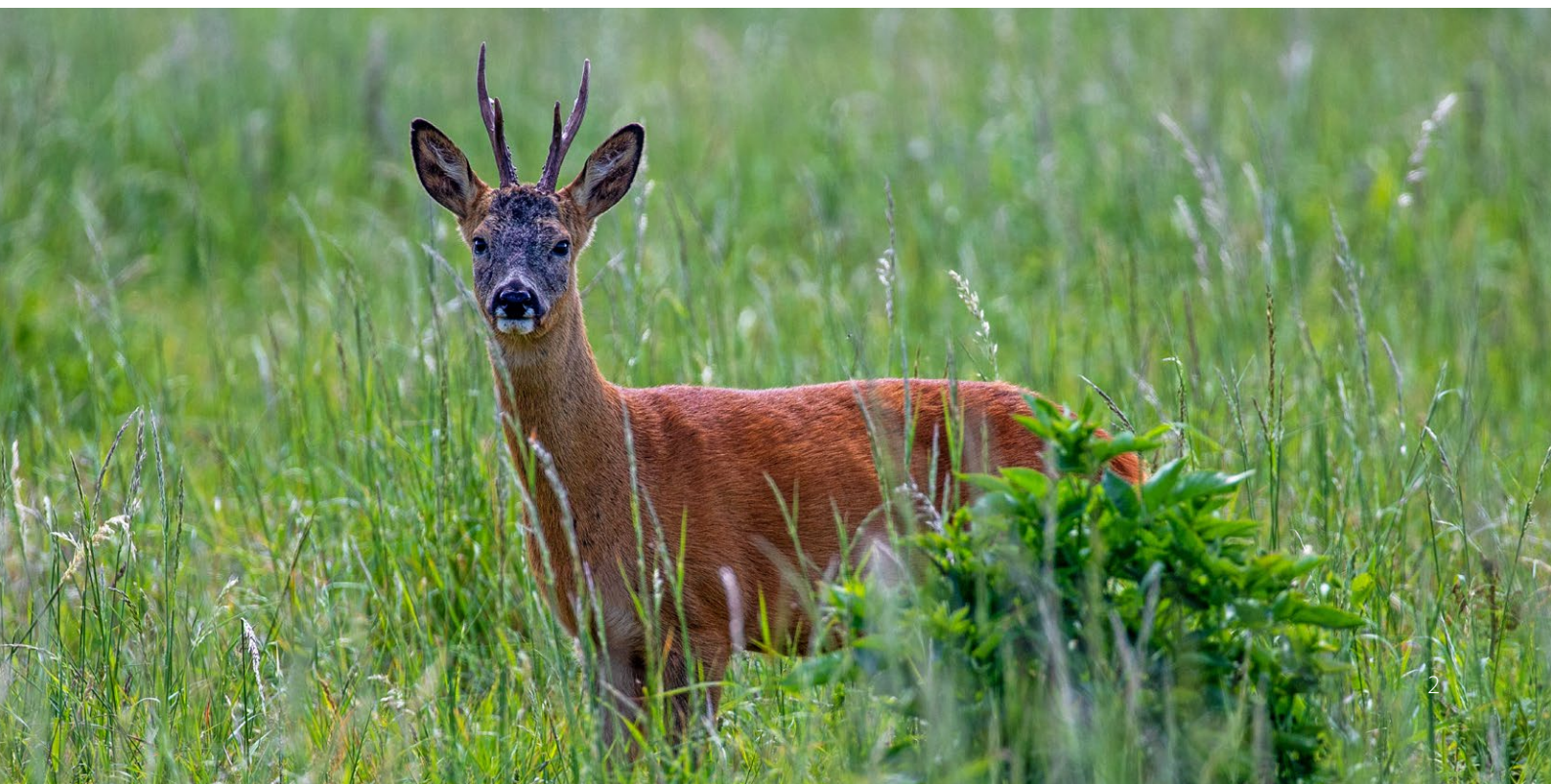
# How stakeholder collaboration can improve landscape-scale deer management

## Key points

- Deer management is an important issue for biodiversity renewal in the UK.
- Deer populations require collaborative management to reduce negative social, economic and ecological impacts.
- By using a participatory stakeholder process, different views were explored, and eight pathways were found to enhance co-operation on the goals of deer management.
- A holistic and community-oriented approach is key to unlocking more innovative and effective deer management strategies, while new partnerships with the food justice sector could create opportunities for venison supply chains.
- It is vital to share data and evidence among stakeholders, and to communicate clearly and consistently to foster trust among organisations, and with broader audiences.

**‘Seeing the Forest for the Deer’ (ExCASES 2024) aimed to help better frame, co-ordinate, and develop common goals for managing deer at the landscape level by engaging the expertise of a diverse group of stakeholders.**

High populations of wild deer can impact on biodiversity renewal, and current management approaches are often fragmented in ways which limit the potential for socio-economic benefits. Considering a broad range of perspectives generated recommendations that support more collaborative, holistic deer management approaches which provide additional public benefits.



# Challenges of deer management

In the UK, increases in deer populations in some places are having detrimental impacts on biodiversity, climate change initiatives (like tree planting), and deer welfare.<sup>1,2</sup> Additional societal costs of high populations include disease transmission, crop damage and road traffic collisions.<sup>3</sup> These effects are expected to get worse,<sup>4</sup> and many stakeholders who manage land say that killing deer (culling) is essential for management.<sup>5</sup> There are also non-lethal ways of managing deer and their impacts, including using tree guards to protect saplings, and fencing to exclude deer.

Deer management is currently the responsibility of individual landowners, with devolved governments having little (Scotland) or no regulatory powers (England, Wales, and Northern Ireland). Landscape-scale management approaches are necessary as deer readily move across land ownership boundaries.<sup>6</sup> However, while frameworks such as regional Deer Management Groups have sometimes been successful, more effective delivery requires wider collaboration. This can be challenging because it demands sustained, co-ordinated efforts across large areas and often includes many landowners and managers who have different objectives for their land.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, deer management is a contested issue because different people value deer and understand their presence and impacts in the landscape in different ways.<sup>7</sup> In the UK, hunting and venison are often associated with sport, wealth and the land-owning class, which raises questions around wider accessibility and equity.<sup>8</sup> This can limit the potential for positive social outcomes of deer management, such as more equitable provision of venison to local supply chains. A more holistic approach, therefore, requires greater consideration of socio-economic dimensions.

## What we did

To explore these questions of framing, co-ordination and increasing public benefits, 'Seeing the Forest for the Deer' used a structured, participatory and deliberative process based on a series of workshops in the South Downs National Park.

By inviting participants who were not usually involved in deer management activities and decisions (e.g., food justice and redistribution organisations, local councillors, academics and educators, animal welfare and countryside experts), we engaged a wider range of voices to explore and identify the challenges and opportunities of taking a more integrated and collaborative approach to managing deer at the landscape-scale in the UK.

The workshop series offered a valuable forum for different stakeholders to understand each other's worldviews, priorities, values and perspectives on deer management.



# Pathways towards greater collaboration

## Our recommendations

Stakeholders who have diverse environmental values and goals can agree on general principles of resilience and environmental/social justice. Our report makes **eight recommendations** that support multistakeholder collaboration in landscape-scale deer management.

### 1 Individuals and organisations involved in managing deer should adopt a holistic, community-orientated framing and approach, which emphasises the interconnectedness of people and nature.

Deer management is a crucial issue for nature restoration, meaning that a more comprehensive way of managing deer could trigger significant change and have a range of benefits for biodiversity, climate change, ecosystem health and resilience, food security, nature connection, and rural incomes. A framing and approach that focuses on community, highlighting social and ecological resilience, could help create common goals and duties among stakeholders with different values (see Box 1).

#### Box 1 What is a community-orientated framing?

A community-oriented framing explains deer management as a way to protect and improve the quality and availability of public goods (e.g., woodlands with high biodiversity and resilience). It considers the historical context of how humans and deer have interacted over time and sees people as part of nature, with responsibilities. It supports food sovereignty by creating local supply chains, making venison more accessible and encouraging 'less, better meat'. A community-oriented framing fosters social cohesion and collaboration by enabling diverse stakeholders through shared learning, experience, and training; providing structures and support for participation and conflict resolution, and actively engaging local communities, raising awareness of environmental issues and providing opportunities for 'hands on' learning and nature connection.



## **2 Deer managing stakeholders should embrace the value of diverse voices and practitioners.**

It is important to involve new advocates from outside the deer managing community to enrich the discussion, improve the socio-economic outcomes, and expand the scope and attractiveness of messages to people with different values. Different organisations have different levels of trust and influence with different communities, and collaborating can increase their impact and benefit. As deer populations and their movements increasingly link rural and urban areas, it is important to bridge this perceived gap in a positive way. Moreover, participants identified that deer management can be a space that excludes or discourages women, young people, and people from minority ethnic groups from joining and succeeding, which needs to be addressed.

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## **3 Deer-managing stakeholders should engage and collaborate more widely with the food justice sector.**

Deer management should be linked with food security and access to sustainable protein, by working with organisations that promote food justice and redistribution. This can help overcome challenges of fairness and availability related to deer management and venison, making deer management align with broader societal goals.

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## **4 Stakeholders should share data and promote wider use of (and access to) evidence and experiential knowledge via a dedicated platform.**

Deer management at landscape-scales needs to use mixed methods that give data on deer numbers, impacts, and outcomes, to show and explain the reason for deer management actions, and to establish trust in deer management operations. Deer managers need data on deer numbers and cull returns to support management decisions, predict venison supply, and co-ordinate more effective deer management interventions at landscape-scales. Policy makers, public representatives, and community leaders need data-based evidence to be able to promote and support deer management. A database that is open-source and independently hosted should be set up that allows the collection of anonymised data on deer numbers and cull returns, overcoming the current trust issues related to returning and sharing cull data with statutory bodies.

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## **5 Networks should be established and evolve to embrace new sectors and collaborators.**

Workshop participants were interested in forming new networks and changing existing networks to: align on common principles; combine different types of knowledge (scientific and experiential); encourage inclusion and partnerships across different disciplines and sectors; exchange data and plan systematically among different organisations; identify joint funding opportunities; and offer facilitation advice and resources. Different groups of people with various interests in the social and environmental aspects of a place could present convincing cases for local authority and national government backing.

## 6 It is important to build better trust between organisations, and with wider publics.

Coalitions that include a wider variety of sectoral interests could help to create trust among different stakeholders and larger audiences. This is needed to effectively and quickly involve resilient co-operative delivery pipelines.

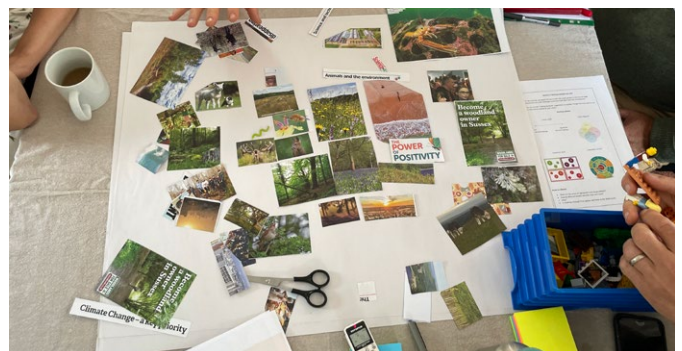
## 7 Deer managing stakeholders need to take a joint ownership approach to communications.

Joint communications create a more consistent, common story; reduce the perceived danger of negative reactions from the public or members of any single organisation; boost public trust in the honesty of messages; and present a united stance and stronger argument for backing from policy makers.

We provide a set of statements and principles, developed by stakeholders in our workshops, that can be used by organisations in their communications (shown in Box 2).

## 8 Public policy should facilitate and incentivise collaborative deer management.

Public policies and initiatives should have more links with landscape-scale deer management and venison supply chains. More funding is especially needed to support non-capital works such as public engagement, facilitation, data management, and leadership training. This would increase the ability of deer managers to offer products into 'new' supply chains without taking away from their focus on practical management.



A selection of images depicting different participatory activities used during the research process.

## **Box 2** Principles for use in joint communications between organisations around deer management

- 1** The management of deer populations to sustainable levels – where vegetation and trees can periodically establish and flourish without protection – is important for dynamic nature renewal and climate change mitigation.
- 2** People have coexisted with, and managed, deer populations in Britain for millennia. Evidence-based, proactive deer management is important to support diverse, resilient ecosystems through regulating the abundance and distribution of herbivore pressure.
- 3** Deer management includes a suite of options including non-lethal methods, such as the use of fencing and tree guards (which may be appropriate in some scenarios). Evidence-based culling, by trained professionals following best practice guidelines, is an important and necessary part of deer management.
- 4** There is broad agreement amongst land managers that, in places, a reduction in deer numbers through culling is necessary.
- 5** Deer are a valued part of our ecosystems, and at sustainable densities (that allow the regeneration of plants and trees) can enhance and diversify woodland landscapes.
- 6** Deer management strives to achieve an equitable and sustainable coexistence between people and deer that enables nature renewal.
- 7** The welfare of deer is a priority for deer management, and effective deer management supports the overall health of deer populations.
- 8** Wild venison is a quality product of positive environmental management/stewardship. A more accessible wild venison supply chain could be part of a dietary transition that supports local, sustainable, healthy and just food provision.
- 9** Taking a community-orientated approach allows us to highlight the wider socio-cultural benefits that sustainable deer management can provide.
- 10** The focus of deer management has changed over time, becoming a key objective for conservation initiatives and evidence-based land management.

### Box 3 What do these recommendations mean for your sector?

#### Land managing & conservation organisations

- Recognise deer management as a keystone landscape restoration issue
- Adopt a holistic, community-orientated, and resilience-based framing
- Proactively engage with stakeholders and communities
- Share data, evidence, and best practice
- Embrace partners outside of the land managing community
- Establish joint principles: be cohesive and consistent in communications around deer

#### Holistic outcomes

- New partnerships
- Integrated objectives
- Cohesive messaging
- Increased trust
- New funding opportunities
- Community buy-in
- New venison markets
- Improved collaboration
- Shared communications
- More resilient landscapes
- More biodiverse woodlands
- Healthier deer populations
- Increased connection to nature

#### Food redistribution organisations

- Engage with land managers over the potential for venison procurement and redistribution
- Advise land managers in policy development, engagement and advocacy in relation to venison
- Collaborate with land managers to develop local, equitable venison supply chains through joint funding applications and projects
- Demonstrate how venison can be affordably included in people's diets

#### Statutory bodies & policy makers

- Recognise deer management as a keystone issue in policy development, with potential to deliver ecological, social and economic benefits
- Support development of coalitions of stakeholders, and joint funding applications
- Financially incentivise collaborative deer management (capital and non-capital works) in government funding schemes
- Facilitate public procurement of venison for re-distribution by third party organisations

#### Local authorities & community leaders

- Collaborate with diverse land managers over deer management
- Support local funding opportunities to facilitate collaboration and venison supply chains
- Convene and facilitate engagement between land managers and local communities

#### References

- <sup>1</sup>Deer Working Group. (2020). The management of wild deer in Scotland: Deer Working Group report. Scottish Government; <sup>2</sup>Ramirez, J. I., et al. (2018). Effects of wild ungulates on the regeneration, structure and functioning of temperate forests: A semi-quantitative review. *Forest Ecology and Management*, 424, 406–419; <sup>3</sup> Scottish Environment LINK. (2020). *Managing Deer for Climate, Communities and Conservation*; <sup>4</sup> Spake, R., et al. (2020). Forest damage by deer depends on cross-scale interactions between climate, deer density and landscape structure. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 57, 1376-1390; <sup>5</sup>Thirgood, S.J. (1995). The effects of sex, season, and habitat availability on patterns of habitat use by fallow deer (*Dama dama*). *Journal of Zoology*, 235, 645-659; <sup>6</sup>Kirkland, H., et al. (2021). Successful deer management in Scotland requires less conflict not more. *Frontiers*, 2; <sup>7</sup> Pollock, M.L., et al. (2022). Overcoming DeerManagement Challenges. Scotland's Rural College (SRUC); <sup>8</sup> Macmillan, D.C. (2000). An economic case for land reform. *Land Use Policy*, 17, 49-57; EXCASES (2024).



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ExCASES is a 'solutions generator' designed to tackle issues facing biodiversity renewal that are not covered by RENEW's four core themes. It provides an agile, flexible mechanism to work collaboratively with partners, researchers, and organisations from diverse sectors on focused topics. This cross-cutting theme is run by an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the National Trust and the University of Exeter.

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