

COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD POSITION STATEMENT



THE MANAGEMENT OF WILD DEER

For the Cotswolds AONB's landscape management objectives to be achieved it will be necessary to ensure that deer populations in the Cotswolds are maintained at a sustainable level.

The Board recommends:

- A collaborative approach towards deer management by major landowners and organisations within the AONB, including the potential establishment of a Cotswolds Deer Forum.
- A partnership approach to the development, promotion and implementation of an agreed Deer Management Strategy for the AONB, including the collection and collation of deer population and impacts data.
- An increase in awareness of deer and deer-related issues in the Cotswolds, targeted at a range of audiences including landowners and managers, public bodies and the general public.
- A reduction of the barriers to a local Cotswold wild venison market. This should include putting in place an infrastructure which allows market development, potentially using Cotswolds Choice branding and promotion, and addressing issues such as planning and other regulations.

BACKGROUND

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) have been designated to ensure that the special qualities of the finest landscapes in England and Wales are conserved and enhanced.

The Cotswolds Conservation Board (CCB) is the body set up by Parliament to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Cotswolds AONB and increase awareness and understanding of its special qualities. In fulfilling these roles, the Board seeks to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities within the AONB.

This position statement addresses the issue of wild deer in the Cotswolds as both a valuable asset and as a potential threat to the character of the AONB. It takes forward elements covered in the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2013 – 2018.

Deer are a part of the Cotswolds countryside, with park deer being a particularly important historical and cultural component of the area. Some features in the Cotswold landscape are the direct product of deer management, including high boundary walls and park pales to keep deer in parks. Indeed Lodge Park was built as a grandstand for deer coursing. The chance to see these large mammals is part of the pleasure of living in, working in or visiting the AONB. The CCB is therefore committed to maintaining a population of wild roe and fallow deer within the AONB. Moreover a properly managed deer population in balance with its environment can be a source of local income generated from stalking and sales of venison.

There are currently four species of wild deer in the Cotswolds: fallow, muntjac, roe and sika. Of these species only roe are native to the UK. However fallow deer have been present in the region since the Middle Ages and are seen as a traditional part of the Cotswold landscape.

Sika are present only in small numbers and in a restricted area around Wychwood, whereas, fallow, roe and muntjac are all increasing in numbers and expanding their ranges throughout the AONB.

Fallow are currently present in high densities throughout the AONB whilst roe and muntjac are present at low to medium densities in many parts of the AONB.

The extension in geographic range of deer and the increase in deer densities have been encouraged by changes in land use, particularly the move to year-round crops, set-aside, expansion of forestry and increased natural / semi-natural habitat connectivity. These have increased suitable habitat for both deer foraging and shelter.

In addition, warmer winters mean that there is a more plentiful supply of food all year round, with fewer and shorter periods of harsh conditions, resulting in higher rates of breeding success and survival.

There is currently no reason why the trend in increasing deer numbers and range expansion will not continue.

A SUSTAINABLE POPULATION OF WILD DEER

A sustainable population of wild deer in the AONB is one which is in balance with the environment and is not having negative effects on either the economic or social needs of those who live, work in or visit the Cotswolds. There are already signs that this balance is not being achieved:

- Current densities of *fallow deer* are already too high in some areas and are having a negative impact on habitats. These populations must be reduced if a sustainable balance is to be achieved.
- *Muntjac* numbers and densities are also having negative impacts and need to be controlled.
- The level of *roe deer*, whilst currently not causing unacceptable damage, will need to be monitored and appropriate management put in place if negative impacts increase.

ISSUES AND IMPACTS

Habitats & Land Use

Many Cotswolds woodlands (a significant number of which are small ancient woodlands particularly vulnerable to damage from deer) are suffering from the adverse impacts that high densities of deer can have. These impacts include browsing, which reduces the natural regeneration of tree and shrub seedlings, reduces the survival of coppice stools, and may prevent other plants from flowering and seeding so reducing the biodiversity of woodlands. Browsing and fraying damage also affect the quality, and therefore value, of timber and coppice growth.

Deer management is essential for the protection and enhancement of the ancient woodlands of the Cotswolds, as well as being important in productive estate forestry.

Deer also impact on agricultural and horticultural crops adjacent to woodland, through browsing and lying up. They may also visit and damage gardens in villages and more suburban and even urban areas.

Deer Vehicle Collisions

The growth in the number of deer, combined with the growth in road traffic volume and speed, means that there are an increasing number of road traffic accidents involving deer.

It is estimated that there may be around 80,000 deer-related road traffic accidents each year across Great Britain, raising obvious welfare concerns from both the human and animal perspective (10% of deer hit by vehicles die some time later of their injuries away from the collision site). Mapping of deer vehicle collisions by the Deer Initiative shows a number of 'hotspots' within the Cotswolds AONB – appendix 1.

Disease

Deer suffer from or may be implicated in the spread of zoonoses such as Lyme disease and animal diseases such as Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB), Foot and Mouth, and Bluetongue.

In the Cotswolds bTB is of particular concern. A survey of Tuberculosis in Deer in South- west England and the Cotswolds found a high prevalence of bTB in two of the

three areas surveyed in the Cotswolds, with levels reaching 15.9% and 8.1%. One population of fallow deer in the Cotswolds had a prevalence of 26%¹

CURRENT DEER MANAGEMENT

The need for deer management at a landscape scale has been accepted in the Cotswolds by a number of organisations and landowners. For example there are two Deer Management Groups (DMG) established in the AONB. The North Cotswolds Deer Management Group, covering much of the AONB north of the A40 plus the Painswick area and the Central Cotswolds DMG centered on the area around Chedworth. However, these groups do not provide deer management cover across the whole AONB area and there is a need for other groups to be established. Wild deer move through the Cotswold landscape without regard to ownership boundaries underpinning the need for collaborative management.

Sources of Advice and Support for deer management

Deer management advice, including to the local Deer Management Groups is provided through the Deer Initiative (DI).

The DI is a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private organisations 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. The principles of the accord are:

- A sustainable and balanced population of wild deer
- A humane, responsible and sensitive approach to the management of wild deer
- An experienced and knowledgeable capability in deer management
- An informed public understanding of deer management
- A partnership approach to reducing the adverse environmental and economic impacts of wild deer

Subject to sufficient resources, the DI can provide support such as: monitoring deer populations and impacts; promoting best practice; providing technical and infrastructure support; assisting with raising awareness; and supporting venison marketing.

Through a special working group the DI produces Best Practice Guidelines on a range of deer management issues.

¹ Report of the 2006 – 2007 South-west England and Cotswolds Survey of Tuberculosis in Deer, Defra, August 2008

Venison marketing

Currently the majority of deer carcasses that are produced from deer culling in the Cotswolds are sold direct to game processors outside the AONB. Prices received fluctuate depending upon regional and national demands.

Changes to *Meat Hygiene Regulations* have relaxed some of the constraints on producing small quantities of wild game meat (including venison) for local sale direct to the final consumer and this could open up a number of opportunities for establishing local venison production

FUTURE ISSUES AND OPTIONS

Unregulated numbers of deer could be a major impediment to achieving some of the management objectives for the AONB. Concern arises because increasing deer populations in the Cotswolds are likely to result in:

- More Deer Vehicle Collisions with the likelihood of increasing human casualties and animal welfare issues
- Greater incidence of disease, including bluetongue, and bTB
- Increased adverse impacts on the biodiversity and ecological condition of ancient and other woodlands
- Damage to timber and coppice quality, with consequent problems in achieving increased woodland management or woodland expansion and creation

Conversely there are potentially positive benefits to be gained through the active management of the deer population, including:

- A viable local venison industry, possibly exploiting Cotswolds branding and promotion (though this will depend upon addressing issues such as regulation and planning)
- Increased tourism opportunities. The public love to see deer and this could be exploited in the Cotswolds, as elsewhere, through the provision of opportunities to watch deer, for example on guided walks.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

The Deer Initiative www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk
Deer Vehicle Collisions www.deercollisions.co.uk
Defra's strategy for the Sustainable Management of Wild Deer in England
Cotswolds AONB www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk
Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2013 - 2018

NOTES

The Cotswolds Conservation Board has the statutory duty to pursue the following two purposes:

- a) to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB; and
- b) to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.

In fulfilling these roles, the Board has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of people living in the AONB.

The Board is comprised of members appointed by the local authorities, parish councils and the Secretary of State. The Board, formed in December 2004, is the only organisation that looks after the AONB as a whole.

The Cotswolds AONB was designated in 1966 and extended in area in 1990. It is one of 38 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty across England and Wales. It is the largest AONB, covering 790 sq.miles (2038 sq.km). It is a landscape of equal importance to National Parks such as Snowdonia and the Lake District.

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