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NEWS

Compiled by **Andy Cowan**

Newspaper/internet reports recently indicate a large push in Scotland for the promotion of venison and deer farming generally. I remember, not so long ago, that they were regarded a severe threat to the environment and that most Scots seemed to want them to be eliminated from their country altogether. There is now a fresh debate over the culling of red deer in Scotland. One estate owner has said there were too few mature stags, while Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has rejected suggestions of the animals' demise.

Recent figures from the BBC website gave an overview of a recent SNH report. The report assessed the economic benefits and costs of Scotland's red deer herd and some of the figures are outlined below.

Deer numbers

There are estimated to be between 360,000 and 400,000 red deer in Scotland. According to estimates there could also be 200,000 to 350,000 roe deer, 25,000 sika and as many as 2,000 fallow.

Economic worth

Deer stalking is thought to generate £105m (A\$180m) a year for the UK economy with £70.4m (A\$120m) of that money remaining in Scotland. Clients of sporting estates can expect to pay up to £500 (A\$850) to shoot a stag and £100 (A\$170) for a hind. It has also been estimated that a total of 2,520 jobs were associated with deer management.

Impact on forestry

According to the SNH report, studies have suggested that deer browsing on Sitka spruce can affect how long it takes the trees to grow. Trees damaged by deer can take about a year longer to grow in height than those that have not been browsed on. Much longer delays have been recorded on other species. It has also detailed how Forestry Commission Scotland manages about 1.6m acres (660,000 ha) of forestry and that in 2009/10 the cost of forest protection in Scotland, which mostly involved efforts to control deer, ran to £10.5m (A\$18m).

Road accidents

It has been estimated that in Europe as a whole between 500,000 and one million traffic accidents involving deer happen each year. Within the UK, between 42,500 and 74,000 deer-related collisions occur every year resulting in about £17m (A\$30m)- of material damage. Up to 700 of these accidents involve injuries to drivers or passengers. For Scotland, SNH has assessed that the total cost of material damage and human injury to be £9.4m (A\$16m).

Urban shift

Deer are increasingly becoming established within urban areas in the UK. One of the reasons for this has been the spread of villages, towns and cities into historic and current deer range. However, roe deer have become well established in the centres of cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, raising the risk of collisions with traffic and damage to gardens and cemeteries. The report suggested that the physical condition of deer in urban areas was poorer than that of animals living in more natural habitats. Urban deer were also at a greater risk of dog attacks and their young being removed from mothers when people wrongly believed they were orphaned. The cost to the Scottish SPCA to go to the aid of deer injured in dog attacks or taken away from their mothers has been estimated to be £12,000 (A\$20,000) a year.

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) also commissioned a pilot study of public perceptions of wild deer. The study suggested positive feelings towards deer are widespread, but leaned favourably towards Highland red deer populations. The research said urban populations were seen as a nuisance. Deer are the type of wildlife the public associated most with Scotland. In fact, 73% of respondents associated deer with

Scotland. Respondents of the survey had an understanding of, and mixed opinions about, stalking (although recognising the economic importance of hunting) but raised moral and welfare concerns about hunting. Wide support was found for the production of venison.

Roe deer are mainly found in towns and cities. Muntjac deer, a non-native species, has been deemed such a serious threat to crops and road safety that SNH urged deer managers to "shoot on sight" muntjac in the south of Scotland. SNH has estimated that if a muntjac population became established in Scotland it could cost up to £2m (A\$3.5m) a year to manage.

Another interesting piece of research in Scotland, led Prof Josephine Pemberton of Edinburgh University, suggests that red deer are breeding earlier each year. Scientists have been studying the red deer population on the Isle of Rum since 1953 - the longest running research projects of its kind anywhere in the world. The impact of climate change on deer is thought to be the result of improved grazing, due to the longer growing season in spring and summer. The climate change research is based on data gathered since 1980.

Scientists monitor deer living in the north of Rum every day of the year and are able to identify the animals by sight. In spring, the main things they look for are changes in the hinds' udders in order to work out if they're pregnant or lactating. They have found that several timing events have got a lot earlier, for example the calving dates have come forward by about 12 days.

Prof Pemberton believes that the rutting dates have come forward. Also the antler casting and cleaning dates have come forward and they have found deer antlers were also getting bigger. She believes there could be a link with climate change and the availability of improved grazing for the animals because they're very sensitive to the grazing conditions in the year when they're being grown. After they have adjusted for the age of the stag, the antlers are getting bigger.

JAPAN

Transport operators in northern Japan are sprinkling wolf urine near roads and broadcasting the roar of lions near train tracks in a bid to keep deer away and reduce accidents. One expressway operator imports wolf urine from the United States to spray on the highways it operates in Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's four main islands.

Although they have increased the height of fences to 2.5 metres from 1.5 metres, fences sometimes break because of heavy snow. These deterrents are needed as a stopgap measure while the fences are being mended. The effect lasts about a month, but the deer soon get used to the smell.

The deer population in Hokkaido was nearly wiped out in the early 20th century because of over hunting and sometimes brutal winters. Recent conservation efforts, and the extinction of the indigenous wild wolf population, have led to their recovery. There are now around 650,000 deer on the island, sometimes wreaking havoc with farmland and transport systems. There were 2,581 incidents involving deer last year, a figure that had doubled in less than a decade.

Land ownership

Two land purchases in recent times have gained a certain amount of publicity for different reasons. Tom Brinkworth, who most deer farmers will have heard of, bought Uardry Station, a famous property east of Hay. An Australian buying Australian land. A second property, Cubby Station, was purchased by foreign interests.

Who is gaining control of Australian agricultural production? What should be of more concern is how foreign companies vertically integrate into the business of agriculture.

Foreigners owned just 5.9 per cent of available agricultural land in 1984. In 2010, 11.3 per cent of Australian agricultural land had some level of foreign ownership. This amounted to 45 million hectares out of a total 398 million. The NFF see continuing foreign investment in Australian agriculture as critical to the health of the sector. To their credit they have lobbied for a foreign investment register for some time. The reason behind this is to see greater transparency around investment to ensure that the motivations behind the investments are clear.

Despite the current lack of specific data, enough information is available to indicate that foreign ownership of agribusiness seems to be clustered around a number of strategic areas. The following are a few facts about agribusiness ownership within Australia:

- the Northern Territory has 20 businesses, wholly or partly under foreign ownership, that between them account for 23.8 per cent of all agricultural land;
- the Shanghai Zhongfu Group, a Chinese state backed company, has been granted the sole right to develop the Ord River Stage 2 development;
- half of the 23 licensed wheat exporters operating in 2011 were foreign owned.

See chart below.

