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Dear Naomi

**Deer Management in the Outer Hebrides and other islands.**

Following John Swinney's visit to Stornoway recently, where concerns were raised about the impacts of deer, we were asked to write to the Young Island Network (YIN) to share our role in deer management in the Outer Hebrides.

Deer populations

Wild deer are present on most of the islands to the west of the Scottish mainland, but not on the Northern Isles. Red deer can be found on most of the islands, with roe deer & some localised fallow deer populations only found on a few islands. Sika deer (an introduced species of deer imported from Asia) have been hybridising with red deer across the country and is a significant issue for the red deer population. Whilst some sika deer may be found on some of the smaller islands located close to the mainland, there are legal protections in place to prevent the spread of sika deer to Islands. These 'Refugia Islands' including the Outer Hebrides, Rum, Jura, Islay and Arran are important to maintain pure red deer populations, free from cross breeding with sika deer.

Red deer Counts are regularly carried out across some of the islands to monitor the local populations. Since 2016, NatureScot has been involved in counting; Arran, Islay, Jura, Mull, Rum, the Uists, Harris & Lewis, and a small area around the South of Skye. Whilst densities of deer across an individual island will vary, this information should be used to inform local sustainable deer management discussions and actions to reduce impacts or concerns such as agricultural damage/ Deer Vehicle Collisions/ high woodland impacts.

## Deer Management

Deer Management is carried out primarily by estates in a collaborative way through Deer Management Groups (DMGs). This is done in a voluntary manner with individual estates setting their population levels and cull targets and agreeing those through the DMGs. We are working closely with DMGs to ensure that effective management brings deer numbers and densities down to sustainable levels and reduces negative impacts. Whilst we favour a voluntary and collaborative approach to deer management, we can make use of a range of powers available to us when necessary, to secure vital benefits for nature and climate change.

Crofters and 'nominated controllers' can also control deer through a General Authorisation <https://www.nature.scot/node/4284226>. This licence enables crofters and others to shoot marauding deer where they are causing damage to improved agricultural land or enclosed woodland. We maintain a list of people (controllers) who are suitably qualified to shoot deer if nominated by a crofter, referred to as a "fit and competent controller". On Uist we are working with the Uist Community Marksmen group to provide a better link between deer complaints and potential controllers.

## Local issues in the Outer Hebrides

We are aware of concerns raised by residents that the increase in the red deer population is leading to a higher occurrence of Lyme infected ticks (particularly in Uist), an increase in road accidents across the islands, impacts on agriculture and damage from trampling and browsing.

A helicopter count was carried out in autumn 2022 over most of the Outer Hebrides with a final area (North Uist) covered in March 2023. The August count confirmed that the deer population was higher than previously thought, and in response, cull targets were significantly increased. We are continuing to work closely with The Lewis and Harris DMG, the Uist DMG, individual estates and others to ensure that effective management brings deer numbers and densities down to sustainable levels and reduces negative impacts.

## Research and Lyme Disease

Local staff are involved with the Lyme disease group on Uist, along with SCF, NHS - Western isles, CNES Environmental Health staff and councillors, local vets and epidemiologists, community council reps and other individuals. The group was set up in response to the high incidence of Lyme Disease on Uist and has been supported by ongoing research, carried out by team from the University of Glasgow and Liverpool. This research has confirmed what many in the Uist community have been reporting for some time that people are picking up ticks much closer to home. Deer have a key role in producing and spreading ticks but small mammals such as rats and voles have a role in infecting ticks with the Lyme Disease bacteria. The research is ongoing and is informing our work with the Uist community, the Uist Deer Management Group and others to find ways to reduce the tick burden in and around villages. The next stage of the research is to look at the effectiveness of different interventions.

We are happy to meet with the YIN to discuss their concerns further and to listen to their views and ideas as to how to address their concerns.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Maclennan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**David Maclennan**

Head of Operations - Operations West

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