Deer hunting with dogs

There are three remaining registered deer packs in Britain: the Tiverton Staghounds, the Devon and Somerset Staghounds and the Quantock Staghounds.

The latest estimate of deer numbers, calculated by Professor Stephen Harris (Environmental Sciences, Bristol University) for the Defra public hearings, estimated there to be about 2,500 red deer in the area hunted by these packs, although he noted other higher estimates have also been made. These hunts kill some 160 deer a year, representing about 15% of the numbers that are culled in the area to maintain a stable population. The remainder are shot by stalkers. Young males are hunted during March and April, while mature males are hunted through the autumn months. Hinds are chased from November through to the end of February. In addition to the three registered packs of dogs that are used to hunt red deer there are at least two unregistered buckhound packs hunting roe deer in the South West which are believed to be killing some 30–40 roe deer a year.

What happens during a deer hunt?

Deer hunts like to provide a long chase for the subscribing followers. Riders and hounds split up the whole herd of deer until a suitable stag is running alone or a hind has been singled out. The dogs are bred for stamina, not speed, so the deer is chased for anything from under an hour to a whole day. Studies on deer suggest that they make the maximum effort to escape. Research has found that pursued deer run to the point of exhaustion when their muscles are no longer able to continue to support running. (Bateson, P. FRS., Behavioural and Physiological Effects of Culling Red Deer, Report to the Council of the National Trust, March 1997). The Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales, chaired by Lord Burns, found that the average chase lasts for three hours over a distance of 18 kilometres.

As the chase continues the deer either slows to a point where the dogs catch up or it simply lies down, too exhausted to run any further. At this point the animal is “brought to bay” – it stops running and turns to face its pursuers. According to hunt supporters the dogs then hold the deer at bay, without attacking, and the deer is humanely shot either with a prescribed shotgun or humane killer. However, the hounds may reach the deer before hunt followers. This means that the followers may not be able to prevent the hounds attacking the deer before it can be killed. Hunt monitors have filmed deer being savaged and mauled by dogs at this stage and the Burns Inquiry accepted that deer are occasionally bitten.

At the start of the hind season, hinds may have a totally dependent calf at foot. These calves have difficulty keeping up during the chase. The target hind will double back trying to urge the calf on. Eventually, she will be forced to abandon the calf to run for her life. The Burns Inquiry said this causes “understandable concern. It puts the hind in a position of having to choose between saving itself and staying with the calf”. It called for action to be taken to end this practice even in the absence of a hunting ban.

The cruelty of deer hunting

There is overwhelming evidence to support the case for a ban on deer hunting with dogs.

Professor Patrick Bateson, the Provost of King’s College Cambridge and the Biological Secretary of the Royal Society, was commissioned by the National Trust to investigate the cruelty or otherwise in deer hunting. Bateson concluded that hunted deer experience a level of suffering comparable to that sustained by an animal that loses a limb in a road accident. (Bateson, P. FRS., Behavioural and Physiological Effects of Culling Red Deer, Report to the Council of the National Trust, March 1997.) Deer hunting was subsequently banned on National Trust and Forestry Commission land.
The Burns Inquiry accepted that when hunted with dogs the welfare of the deer becomes “seriously compromised”. (Burns Report – par 6.33)

In December 2002 Defra Minister of State, Rt Hon Alun Michael MP stated, when introducing the Government’s Hunting Bill which included a ban on deer hunting with dogs, that the evidence was incontrovertible that deer hunting could not meet the tests of utility or avoiding cruelty (House of Commons 3rd Dec 2002).

Are more humane alternatives of deer control available?

The most common, selective and humane method of culling deer is shooting. The Burns Inquiry concluded: “Stalking, if carried out to a high standard and with the availability of a dog or dogs to help find any wounded deer that escape, is in principle the better method of culling deer from an animal welfare perspective. In particular, it obviates the need to chase the deer in the way which occurs in hunting”.

Donald Broom, Professor of Animal Welfare at Cambridge University conducted an independent review of the scientific literature relating to deer hunting. He concluded: “It is clear that the welfare of hunted animals is very poor… If high standards of shooting are achieved, this will result in a considerably lower net extent of poor welfare than hunting with dogs.” (Broom, D.M. The Welfare of Deer, Foxes, Mink and Hares subjected to Hunting by Humans, Cambridge University Animal Welfare Information Centre, 2000.)

Approximately 250,000 deer are culled by shooting every year. There is a level of wounding associated with stalking, and there is some debate as to the actual level of wounding. An extensive review by Bradshaw & Bateson (2000) has concluded that “the wounding rate by the stalkers would have to be far higher than any estimate that has been suggested so far for the cessation of hunting to have no welfare benefit”. Data examined by Professor Macdonald of Oxford University showed that, of nearly 5,000 animals culled by British Deer Society members on Ministry of Defence land, less than 2% were not killed virtually instantly.

Deer management in the South West following a hunt ban

Hunt supporters in Exmoor argue that if deer hunting is banned, deer will not be tolerated in the area and will be shot. This “no hunting – no deer” threat has often been used to promise dire consequences for red deer on Exmoor in the event of a ban. However, it should be recognised that although the red deer population density is fairly high in the Exmoor National Park and the Quantocks very large numbers of red deer in the South West are found in non-hunted areas. This undermines the argument that a ban on hunting would lead to the eradication of the deer. Additionally, red deer thrive in various other parts of the country e.g. Cumbria, East Anglia and Hampshire, where no deer hunting with dogs occurs. In Scotland, where deer hunting with dogs has been banned since 1959, a healthy deer population remains. Therefore, the existence of hunting is clearly not a precondition for the survival of red deer.

The Burns Report concluded that “…in the event of a ban some overall reduction in total deer numbers might occur unless an effective deer management strategy was implemented…”. In the Brendon Hills, in the eastern end of the Exmoor National Park, (where fallow deer are not hunted) farmers and other landowners tolerate in the region of 500 fallow deer, in addition to red deer and roe deer. Fallow deer have a tendency to aggregate in feeding herds and thus the potential to cause local damage, yet they have not been eradicated.

It is worth noting what has happened since the bans on deer hunting were introduced by the National Trust and the Forestry Commission some six years ago. It should be recalled that dire threats and predictions about the consequences for the deer were also made at the time.
On the Quantocks, the annual count undertaken by the Quantocks Deer Management and Conservation Group in spring 2003 was very similar to the previous year’s record count. Some 819 red deer were sighted compared to 478, 524, 802, 745 and 893 in the years 1997–2000 and 2002 respectively. (There was no count in 2001 due to FMD). The total number seen in spring 2003 was slightly down (819) but another 28 were seen on a new counting block nearby giving a similar overall count. The annual count of red deer on the NT’s large estate at Holnicote on Exmoor recorded 457 red deer in 2002 – a figure very similar to that recorded in recent years. The Trust has a deer management plan in place.

The Burns Report, as stated above, referred to the need for an effective deer management strategy. It also outlined the existing support being given to encourage local deer management groups through a partnership approach undertaken through the auspices of the Deer Initiative. Further information about the Government’s general approach regarding deer management is evidenced in the recent (October 2002) Forestry Commission report *Sustaining England’s Woodlands*. In a response to one of the recommendations of a steering group they state: “We take our partnership with the Deer Initiative very seriously, and have recently extended our funding of £100,000 per year for a further two years. Our primary focus is to encourage, through this partnership, the setting up and running of Deer Management Groups, and improving their effectiveness and coverage…”.

**Summary**

A ban on deer hunting in those parts of the South West where it continues may result in some changes in numbers and distribution of red deer but should not result in their eradication. Deer thrive and deer management takes place over the majority of the country without the involvement of hunting with dogs. Deer Management Groups are the favoured method and the Government is currently providing a good deal of financial support to this approach. There are Deer Management Groups on Exmoor and the Quantocks, although their ability to undertake long-term planning is limited by their members’ involvement in the ongoing debate on the abolition of deer hunting.