Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy

1 Summary

1.1 This report asks Members to support the preparation of and provide comments on the Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy prior to its consideration for approval by the Lake District Wild Deer Management Steering Group.

Recommendation that you:	**a support the preparation of, and provide comments on, the Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy (Annex 1).**

2 Background

2.1 Wild deer, especially our native species, are an important part of our biodiversity and valued part of our natural heritage, but at the same time they can have a number of negative impacts upon the environment that they are a part of.

2.2 Over the last century the UK has seen a dramatic increase in deer density and distribution due to several factors including land use change in combination with the lack of natural predators. This growth presents a significant management challenge to control the impacts of overgrazing on nature recovery and carbon sequestration efforts. Also, the adverse effects on cultural and rural activities such as commoning, upland farming and woodland management. Effective deer management requires an understanding of the ecological context of balancing human needs with wildlife conservation. This highlights the need for thoughtful management strategies.

2.3 To reduce the impacts of deer on the natural environment we need to bring the deer population to levels that the ecosystem can support to reduce their negative effects. To do this we need to improve our current understanding of the extent of deer populations and their overall impact, whilst encouraging landscape scale collaboration from landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer stalkers and other stakeholders.

2.4 The Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy has been produced by a steering group made up of representatives from the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Forestry England, National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, United Utilities and the North Lakes Red Deer Group. It is this steering group that will own and deliver the Strategy and report its progress to the Lake District National Park Partnership, including this Authority The strategy aims to provide a framework to encourage private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer stalkers and others to support a more holistic and landscape scale approach to the sustainable management of wild deer.

2.5 The strategy encompasses five themes:

- **Better Communication**
  Promote better understanding and support for deer management in the national park.

- **Greater Collaboration**
  Support and improve a collaborative approach towards the management of wild deer at a landscape scale.
- **Robust Data and Evidence**
  Develop strong evidence base and pan-Park baseline to inform management decision.
- **Impact Focused**
  Promote an adaptive management approach to allow impact assessments to directly inform management.
- **Marketable Lake District Venison Brand**
  Develop a market for the sale of Lake District venison.

2.6 In October 2024 the steering group held a workshop at Rheged to engage with wider stakeholders from the Landowner Forum and some of the larger Lake District Estates (see outputs Appendix 2). The feedback was valuable in ground-truthing and informing the final draft for consultation (see appendix 1). One of the other outcomes was the formation of a stakeholder group to advise on the delivery of the strategy, share knowledge and promote best practice to maximise the outputs.

3 Policy Context

3.1 This strategy contributes to the delivery of the Partnership's Plan - Outcome 3: Securing the future of farming and forestry, nature recovery and climate change through Action 2(f) preparation of a Wild Deer management Strategy by March 2025 as this will develop an approach to the control and management of wild deer to achieve nature recovery, and a broader range of multiple public goods and benefits.

3.2 Our Business Plan 2021-24 sets out our priorities under The Future of Farming Spectacular Landscape, Wildlife and Cultural Heritage Farming, which is central to a culture and nature rich landscape, community and economy.

3.3 The need for more effective wild deer management was recognised in 2023 by the English Lake District WHS Steering Group. Their guidance document ***Nature recovery, deer management, and management of fell-going sheep flocks,*** recommends:

(4) A more coordinated and targeted approach to deer management is required, with an initial focus on the North Lakes, but with a need to expand pan Park. ***A Park Deer Management Group would be beneficial to coordinate activity between the existing local wild deer management groups and better manage sustainable deer herds (population and distribution).*** *Non-native, invasive species should be more effectively controlled.* ***Each partner should be asked to (a) further effective deer management on their property, including the removal of barriers to their management; (b) openly share information on deer populations and deer impact assessments, and (c) assist in the development of markets for venison****. FiPL and other partner grant funding mechanisms should assist effective management. Further studies on wild deer population and modelling and population dynamics should be sought.*

4 Options

4.1 a) Members support the preparation of and provide comments the draft Lake District Wild Deer Strategy for approval by the Lake District Wild Deer Management Steering group.

b) Members propose an alternative approach.

5 Proposals

5.1 I propose you accept option a). This will allow the Steering Group to promote and deliver the strategy.

6 Demonstrating Best Value

6.1 The Best Value implications are:

a) Challenge

The previous Government had committed to produce a national deer strategy and although a consultation took place in 2022 a final document was not published. At this time, it is unclear whether this will happen. The Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy will focus on issues relevant to our national park, including increases in grazing pressures, exerted by wild deer, and their negative impact on upland stewardship scheme nature recovery objectives. The strategy recognises the potential adverse effects on the viability of upland sheep farming and our unique farming heritage, special qualities for the Lake District National and attributes of Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site and the requirement for upland open range wild deer management plans. By producing a Lake District strategy, we will be in a stronger position to influence the anticipated national strategy.

b) Compare

There are other documents in national circulation advocating sustainable deer management such as The Deer Initiative which is a partnership committed to achieving and maintaining a sustainable and healthy population of wild deer in England and Wales and the British Deer Society's UK strategy, which aims to inspire a greater number and diversity of people, organisations and governmental bodies to come together to achieve this goal. Both organisations provide the platforms and tools necessary to support the sustainable management of wild deer but not the framework necessary to establish a localised approach working on a "whole" landscape scale; balancing public interest, nature recovery, and the cultural integrity of native wild deer in the Lake District landscape.

To date none of the other Protected Landscapes in England and Wales have a Wild Deer Strategy and have expressed an interest in following in our footsteps.

c) Consult

The draft strategy is currently out for wider consultation until Friday 14 February 2025. This will provide greater awareness on the importance of this subject, and demonstrate our commitment to facilitate, engage and support with the delivery of the strategy. It will build on positive working relationships with partners and a range of other stakeholders, including private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer management groups, deer stalkers and communities, resulting in greater co-operation, support and trust.

d) Compete
Not relevant.

7 Finance Considerations

7.1 Funding and investment is vital to deliver the ambition for this strategy and therefore it is important to explore all appropriate funding sources, both short-term and long-term, to ensure that management of wild deer populations remains a priority.

7.2 It is expected that the majority of funding will be allocated through Environmental Land management (ELMs) schemes, other external grants and through the respective estates and landowners involved in the management of wild deer. Farming in Protected landscapes (FiPL) has also proved to be an invaluable funding stream supporting feasibility studies, thermal drone surveys and the purchase of equipment to aid monitoring, such as drones and thermal binoculars.

7.3 The implementation of the plan is supported within existing LDNPA staff resource and has been accounted within the Service Plan. However, we need to seek further opportunities through partnership working with organisations such as Natural England and the Forestry Commission to take advantage of other funding mechanism for research and management.

8 Risk

The following risks are identified:

ID	Risk	Consequence	Controls required
R1	Wild Deer Management Strategy is not adopted.	A coordinated and integrated approach towards deer management is not achieved and that research, collaboration, information sharing, evidence-based planning and on-ground action remains unsupported. Progress towards the government's stated long-term environmental targets and commitments to increasing biodiversity, such as increases in tree canopy and woodland cover to meet carbon net zero by 2050 will not be achieved.	LDNPP agree the strategy and communicate it through engaging with a range of stakeholders, including private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer management groups, deer stalkers, and others responsible for the management of wild deer in the national park.
R2	Funding	Lack of financial incentives to drive deer management – currently constrained by limited Countryside Stewardship grants aimed at Woodland Management and Creation.	The Steering Group will work with Partners to identify other funding opportunities and to influence the requirement for scheme payments for the

		The strategy will help influence the requirement for scheme payments for the production of open range, deer management plans for the uplands and moorlands. This will provide the structure and incentive necessary to drive long-term, outcome-based control of wild deer populations across open landscapes.	production of open range, deer management plans for the uplands and moorlands.
R3	Lack of support from stakeholders.	To be successful, the strategy will need to be adopted by a range of stakeholders, including private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer management groups, deer stalkers, and others responsible for the management of wild deer in the national park.	To continue to work with the steering group, the stakeholder group and other partners to communicate the strategy through engaging with a range of other stakeholders, including private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer management groups, deer stalkers, and others responsible for the management of wild deer in the national park.

9 Legal Considerations

9.1 There are no legal considerations.

10 Human Resources

10.1 Human resources have already been committed to the project through the Natural Environment Programme Board and Service Plan. There is no additional resource required for the delivery.

11 Diversity Implications

11.1 There are no identified diversity issues resulting from this strategy. The strategy does take into consideration that stakeholders share many values in relation to deer management and divergent views are acknowledged and respected.

12 Sustainability

12.1 The strategy will promote a shared awareness and understanding regarding the position of wild deer and their impact on the landscape. It will provide a recognised framework of good practice for collaborative, sustainable wild deer management and create a mechanism to deliver an evidence base with which to inform landscape scale management to aid the recovery of a network of healthy and resilient habitats and to help influence Government's evolving national deer management strategy. In addition, it will help to reignite interest in the local venison market which in turn will support the sustainable management of wild deer in the National Park.

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Responsible Director:	Steve Ratcliffe, Director of Sustainable Development
Date:	09/01/2025

Annex 1: Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy

LAKE DISTRICT WILD DEER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Consultation Draft

16 December 2024

Forward

Wild deer, especially our native species, are an important part of our biodiversity and valued part of our natural heritage, but at the same time they can have a number of negative impacts upon the environment that they are a part of.

Over the last century the UK has seen a dramatic increase in deer density and distribution due to several factors including, land use change in combination with the lack of natural predators. This growth presents a significant management challenge to control the impacts of overgrazing deer on nature recovery and carbon sequestration efforts. Also, the adverse effects on cultural and rural activities such as commoning, upland farming and woodland management. Effective deer management requires understanding the ecological context and balancing human needs with wildlife conservation. This highlights the need for thoughtful management strategies.

To reduce the impacts of deer on the natural environment we need to bring the deer population to levels that the ecosystem can support and reduce their negative effects. To do this we need to improve our current understanding of the extent of deer populations and their overall impact, whilst encouraging landscape scale collaboration from landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer stalkers and other stakeholders.

This Strategy has been developed by the Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy Steering Group. The steering group is made up of representatives from the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Forestry England, National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, United Utilities and the North Lakes Red Deer Group. The strategy aims to provide a framework to encourage private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer stalkers and others to support a more holistic and landscape scale approach to the sustainable management of wild deer. The strategy ambition is to establish an approach to the sustainable management of wild deer whilst preserving the balance between public interest, nature recovery, and the cultural integrity of native wild deer in the Lake District landscape. This will be achieved through five themes and an agreed set of guiding principles.

Please submit views on this consultation draft directly to Cath Johnson, Natural Environment Adviser, Lake District National Park Authority (cath.johnson@lakedistrict.gov.uk) by Friday 14 February 2025.

Cover Photograph Martin Childs (Martindale Deer Rut)

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Figure 1: Distribution of Wild Deer Species in the UK

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Map 1: Lake District Habitats

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Executive Summary

The ambition of this strategy is to establish an approach to the sustainable management of wild deer, at a “whole” landscape scale, balancing public interest, nature recovery, and the cultural integrity of native wild deer in the Lake District landscape.

This Strategy has been developed by the Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy Steering Group. The steering group is made up of representatives from the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Forestry England, National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, United Utilities and the North Lakes Red Deer Group.

The strategy is intended to provide a local framework to deliver the Government’s anticipated Deer Management Strategy. The Strategy and Action Plan focusses on five themes:

Better Communication	Promote better understanding and support for deer management in the national park.
Greater Collaboration	Support and improve a collaborative approach towards the management of wild deer at a landscape scale.
Robust Data and Evidence	Develop strong evidence base and pan-Park baseline to inform management decision.
Impact Focused	Promote an adaptive management approach to allow impact assessments to directly inform management.
Marketable Lake District Venison Brand	Develop a market for the sale of Lake District venison.

Greater collaboration will underpin all aspects of the strategy.

The five themes will facilitate the following headline outcomes:

- Ensure that wild deer management is incorporated into future ELMs agreements and increase land holdings in agri-environment schemes that support the management of wild deer.
- Secure investment and create incentives to financially support the control of wild deer populations.
- Establish a pan-Park wild deer number baseline and set population parameters to achieve realistic and appropriate sustainable deer numbers.
- Create a Lake District World Heritage Site (WHS) brand for wild venison and deliver actions to create a viable, ethical and sustainable venison product
- To protect red deer from hybridisation and prevent encroachment from non-native deer species.

To be successful, the strategy will need to be adopted by a range of stakeholders, including private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer management groups, deer stalkers, and others responsible for the management of wild deer in the national park.

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Guiding principles

The strategy has been developed to align with the following guiding principles:

- A shared perception with our partners and stakeholders that deer populations and their impacts have significantly increased across the UK in recent years.

- Recognition that deer management is a shared responsibility involving public and private landowners and land managers, conservation and community groups, the agricultural sector, the commercial deer industry, stalkers, the community and government.

- Recognition that deer control requires a coordinated and integrated approach that is supported by research, collaboration, information sharing, evidence-based planning and on-ground action.

- Native red and roe deer have an important cultural, historical and natural place in the Lake District landscape.

- Lake District National Park biodiversity is highly valued, and the highest priority will be given to actions that provide the greatest net benefit to biodiversity across the landscape.

- Stakeholders share many values in relation to deer management and divergent stakeholder views are acknowledged and respected.

- Deer control is targeted and managed to ensure ethical compliance, human safety and compliance with relevant laws, and to minimise adverse animal welfare outcomes.

- Deer control will be guided by Government Strategy, outcomes for Lake District World Heritage Site attributes of Outstanding Universal Value and National Park Special Qualities and management to deliver Favourable or Recovering Condition Status on designated sites.

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1. Wild deer management – what is the current reality

1.1 The National context

There are 6 species of wild deer in England. Red and roe deer are native; fallow, sika, muntjac and Chinese water deer are introduced species. Populations of wild deer have been increasing rapidly over the last 60 years most probably as a result of successful breeding pressure on land availability from increasing human population expansion and in the absence of management the availability of natural habitat for them to expand into (*see Figure 1: Distribution of Wild Deer in the UK*). Wild deer, especially native species, are an important part of our biodiversity and valued part of our natural heritage. In addition, deer management and venison processing and marketing can support rural jobs and businesses.

This growth should initially be viewed as a management challenge. Effective deer management requires understanding the ecological context and balancing the needs of people and landscapes with wildlife conservation.

1.1.1 Nature Recovery and Biodiversity

Wild deer can help increase biodiversity by creating a varied habitat structure, but when numbers become too high for their habitat to support them they can have several negative impacts upon the natural environment. A summary of impacts are outlined below:

- Grazing by large populations of deer reduces native wildlife species diversity in the forest which can in turn affect soils and release carbon.[1]
- Browsing and grazing - eating leaves, new shoots and flowers, reduces the ability of plants to grow, spread or even survive and prevents forests and woodlands from regenerating.
- Fraying or bark stripping – this causes physical damage to trees up to 2m high – and can lead to diseases, die back or degraded quality.
- Trampling - can affect plant growth by changing the surface soil structure or damaging surface roots, including soil erosion which can impact on water quality.
- Dung - is a nutrient source which may favour some plants over others. Dung is also a means of seed dispersal.

1.1.2 Social and economic

Economic and social issues related to high deer populations:

- Spread of diseases in humans, such as Lymes disease and Encephalitis.
- Increase risk of Zoonotic tuberculosis in cattle where deer populations are located close to where cattle are kept.
- Increased reliance on fencing and tree guards in the landscape

[1] The British Trust for Ornithology has reported that common species including robin, wren and blackbird are less likely to be in woodland areas browsed by deer.

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- Road traffic accidents, some of which result in human injuries or fatalities. The RSPCA recently reported that up to 74,000 deer may be involved in vehicle collisions each year in Britain.
- Damage to agricultural, horticultural and timber crops, and also parklands and gardens[2]

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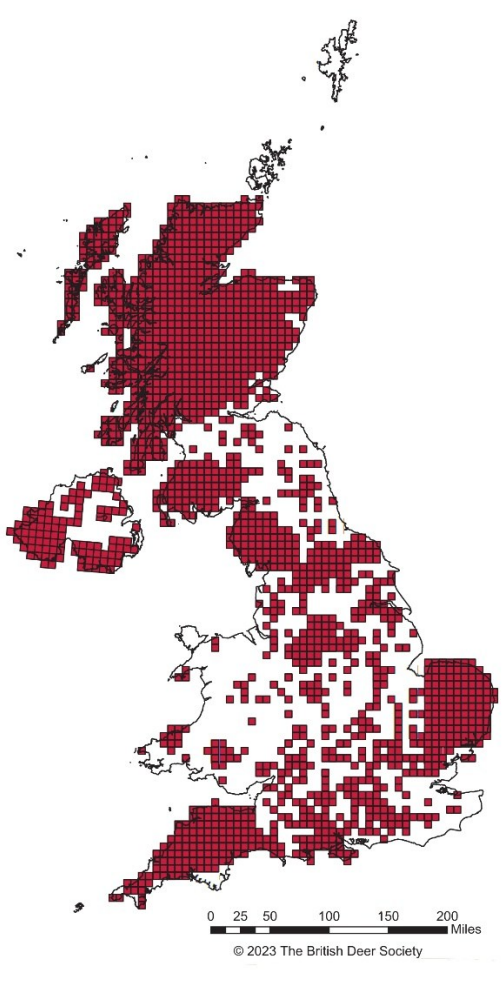
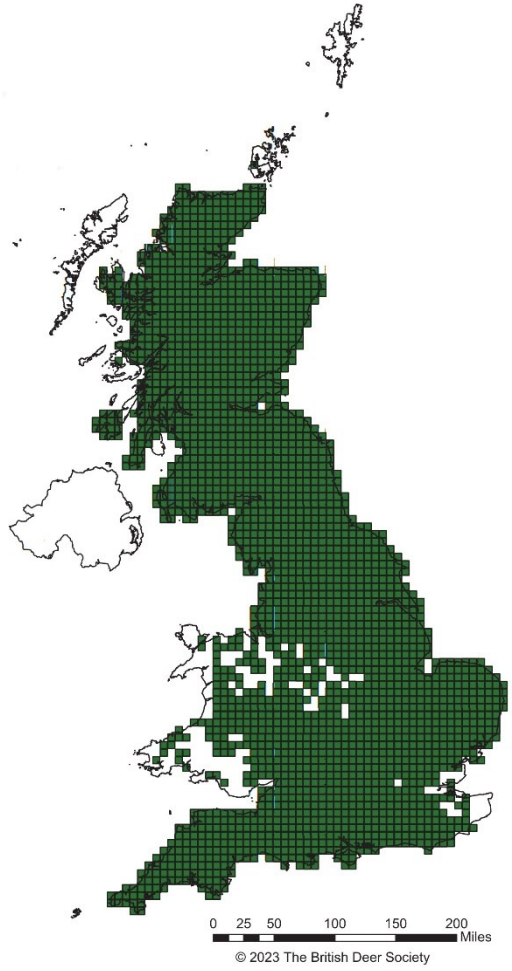
[2] It is estimated that in the UK individual arable farmers are losing more than £1m a year to deer damage and the value of commercial timber production reduced by up to 50% per year.

Figure 1: Distribution of Wild Deer Species in the UK

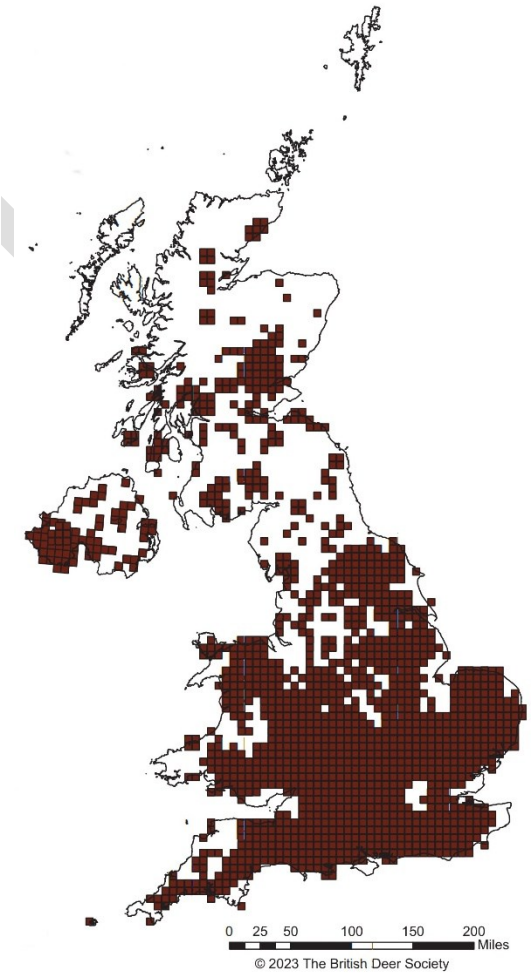
Red deer *(Cervus elaphus)*



Roe deer *(Capreolus capreolus)*

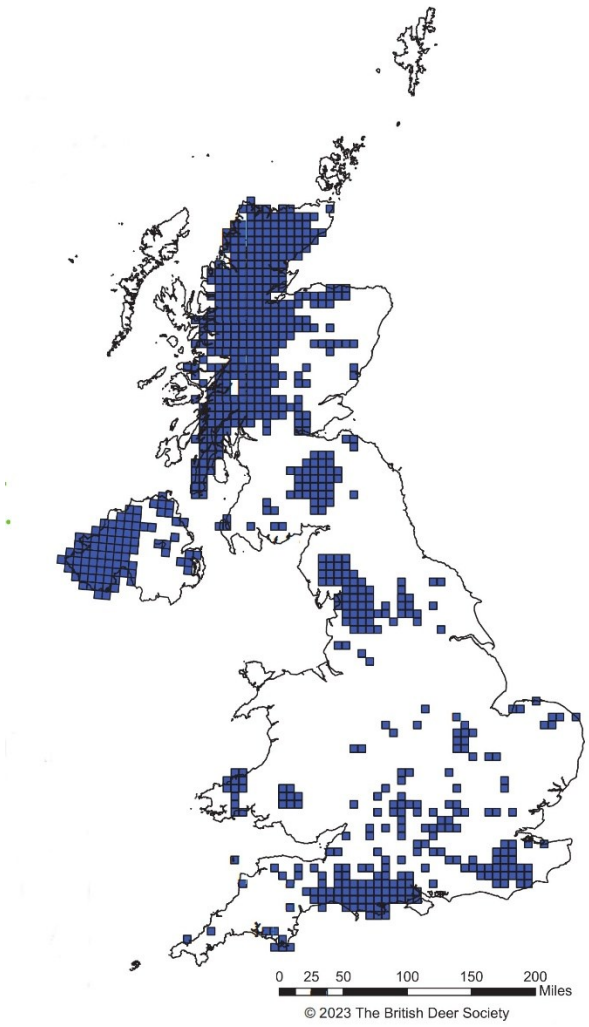


Fallow deer *(Dama dama)*

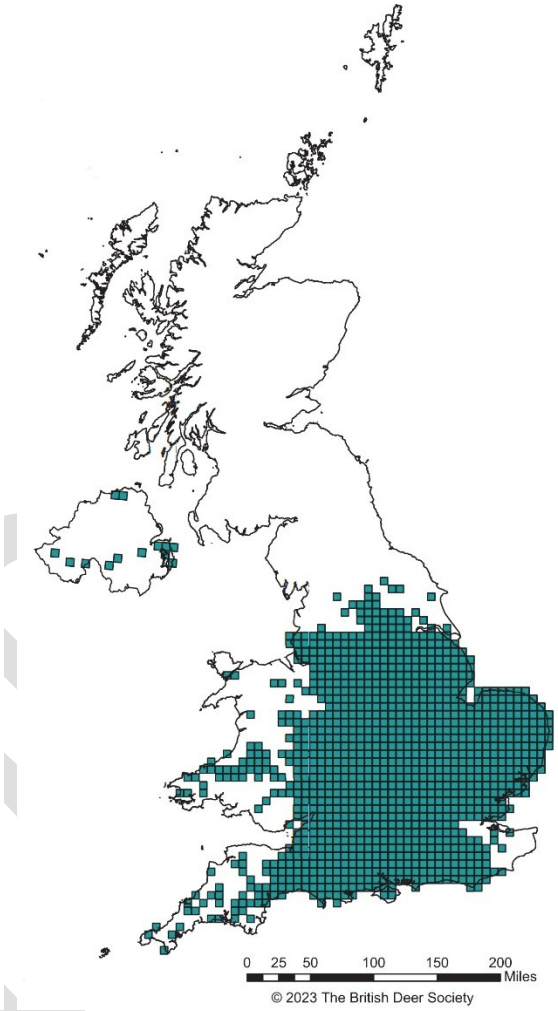


The British Deer Society 2023

Sika deer *(Cervus nippon)*



Muntjac deer *(Muntiacus reevesi)*



Chinese water deer *(Hydropotes inermis)*

The British Deer Society 2023

1.1.3 National Deer Management Strategy

A national strategy is necessary to achieve the following outcomes:

- To create a more joined-up approach to attaining sustainably managed deer populations.
- To support landowners and land managers to deliver effective management on the ground and to expediate progress towards the government's stated long-term environmental targets and commitments, such as increases in tree canopy and woodland cover to meet carbon net zero by 2050.

The previous Government had committed to producing a national strategy and although a consultation took place in 2022 a final document was not published. At this time it is unclear whether this will happen.

The proposed national strategy also assured deer managers that a review of some of the regulatory barriers, identified as restricting operational management, would be undertaken.

Deer Act 1991. Deer are protected by the **Deer Act 1991** (as amended 2007) which regulates how deer can be legally managed. It outlines illegal activities including poaching deer and the use of certain ammunition in hunting deer. Two areas of the Deer Act that are currently being debated are Night Stalking and the Closed Season.

Night Stalking. Under Section 8 (3D) of the Deer Act a licence may be granted by Natural England to allow the shooting of deer at night for the purposes of preserving public health or public safety, conserving the natural heritage and / or preventing serious damage to property e.g. crops.

Deer stalking is often more effective at night as there is less disturbance to herds. Each licence is subject to specific conditions on a case by case basis involving duration, area and numbers, sex and species. This is often too rigid and does not afford deer managers the flexibility to adapt strategies for stalking based on localised deer behaviour in both difficult terrain and unpredictable weather.

Closed Season. The law ensures that female deer with dependent young and male deer still growing their antlers, receive protection and specifies when culling cannot take place. These Close Seasons vary between the different species due to differences in breeding and antler growth cycles. Deer managers believe that the abolition of a male closed season address overpopulation and give stalkers the flexibility to adapt their efforts based on deer behaviour, weather conditions etc.

1.1.4 Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission (FC) are the lead organisation working on the production of a national deer management strategy focused on the managing the impact of deer on trees, woodland and agricultural crops in England, as well as safeguarding their potential benefits. The proposed strategy will, hopefully, set out key actions to:

- reduce impacts of deer on the natural environment
- bring the deer population into sustainable numbers that the ecosystem can support without negative effects
- improve understanding of deer populations and their overall impact.

FC also oversees the allocation of the deer control and management supplement available through Countryside Stewardship on land holdings where deer have been identified as a threat to semi-natural woodlands, regeneration and/or where deer browsing negatively impacts on woodland features, ground flora or structure. FC also provide training and awareness to support the production of deer management plans.

Forestry England (FE) is a division of the FC, responsible for managing and promoting publicly owned forests in England. They manage deer populations in order to look after their forests and land sustainably. Highly skilled wildlife rangers replace the role of Britain's missing predators by sensitively and humanely controlling deer populations in woods.

1.1.5 Deer control across open landscapes

Wild deer herds are not officially owned by anybody and their transitory nature means they are free to roam. Red deer often travel long distances, favouring certain areas according to the season, weather, or disturbance. In recent years the herds traditional patterns of behaviour have altered which could be due to increased disturbance from public access, decreasing numbers of sheep numbers in the uplands, changes to boundary or fencing through agri-environment schemes, and changes to vegetation cover and weather patterns due to the effects of climate change.

The reduction of sheep in the upland and moorland areas, as advocated through agri-environment scheme agreements, such as Countryside Stewardship (CS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), has resulted in increased grazing opportunities for wild deer, especially where sheep are taken off the uplands for the duration of the winter period.

Where significant numbers of deer are present a further reduction of sheep may be required in order to alleviate grazing pressures and ensure the delivery of nature recovery objectives. Wild deer are included in the overall stocking rates but density is based on herd movement and average numbers obtained from standardised counts. Even with this factored in the transitory nature of herds means that density and subsequent pressure on habitats from grazing is not fully controllable.

1.1.6 Financial incentives

CS Higher Tier Financial provides a supplement payment through the deer control and management option (WS1) but only on land parcels where deer have been identified in a Woodland Management Plan as a threat to semi-natural woodlands, regeneration and/or were browsing negatively impacts on woodland features, ground flora or structure.

Landscape Recovery projects can also ensure that deer management is incorporated into management actions for a respective land parcel within the scheme.

In addition to the above payments for the production of open range, deer management plans for the uplands and moorlands are required. This will provide the structure and incentive necessary to drive long-term, outcome-based control of wild deer populations across open landscapes.

1.1.7 Species integrity and welfare

The genetic integrity of our native red deer is at risk from the hybridisation between red and Sika deer, which can occur wherever the two species come into contact. There are proven biological, ecological and even psychological arguments for preserving biodiversity. Red and Sika deer fill slightly different ecological niches, and we have no idea what impact losing native Red might have on our woodland ecology.

Increases in deer populations and range can lead to an increase in tick born human diseases such as Lymes disease and Encephalitis. Wild deer are highly susceptible to Zoonotic tuberculosis infection. In Great Britain there is evidence that wild deer can transmit TB both to other deer, and to cattle. This is more likely to occur where wild deer live or congregate at high population densities and commonly interact with cattle.

1.1.8 Deer stalking industry

According to The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) the average age of BASC deer stalker members is 58 years old. With an ageing deer stalking work force, lack of incentives, including low payments for carcasses due to the absence of a sustainable market for local venison, the industry is struggling to attract new generation of well-trained deer stalkers. Other challenges include difficult terrains and extent of territory, changing land ownership boundaries, recreational disturbance and public perceptions regarding management activity. All of these factors impact the ability of stalkers to control the wild deer across the landscape.

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1.2 The Local Context – Lake District

1.2.1 Wild deer species

There are five species of wild deer that exist within the Lake District National Park. Red deer and roe deer are regarded as native species; whilst Sika and fallow deer are classed as introduced species, although fallow deer are often referred to as naturalised. Muntjac deer were introduced into the UK from China in the 20th century. It has gained a stronghold in southeast England and is spreading northwards, increasingly observed in Cumbria. The long-term viability and well-being of red deer populations will be central to this strategy.

Red and roe deer are part of our natural environment. Hybridisation between red and Sika deer has been occurring and is likely to continue wherever the two species come into contact. Unless properly managed this could ultimately impact on the genetic integrity of native red deer (see 1.1.7).

1.2.2 Lake District habitats

The Lake District supports a unique assemblage of wildlife and habitats. Many of the habitats and species found in the Lake District are recognised for their biodiversity importance at an international level with almost 20% of the National Park area designated for its biodiversity value. Habitats include moss and lichen heath on high montane plateaus, dwarf shrub heath, juniper scrub, tall herb, blanket bog and wet heath, upland oak wood, semi-natural broadleaved woodland, upland hay meadows and pastures reflect pastoral management.

The Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy habitat basemap demonstrates the rich diversity of habitats across the national park (Map 1: Habitat Base Map).

The ambition is to develop and grow a network of landscape scale nature recovery areas and deliver approached that combine farming forestry and land management options which enable nature restoration.

Semi-natural woodlands are distinct in the landscape and some are internationally important habitats. 13% of the national park is with tree canopy or woodland coverage (30,772 hectares) supporting distinctive woodland types such as wood pasture, pollards and old coppice woodland. The national park contains one of the greatest concentrations of ancient trees in Europe and one of the largest oak woodland complexes in England.[3] 74% of woodlands are managed through Forestry Commission and Countryside Stewardship schemes.

Whilst deer play an important part of the UK's woodland ecology high numbers of browsing deer are having a negative effect on the structure, biodiversity and future

[3]Borrowdale Woodland Complex SAC consists of a series of upland oak woodlands in the Borrowdale and Buttermere valleys of the Northwest Lake District. The woodlands are particularly rich in Atlantic and Oceanic bryophytes with many species present rare in England and restricted to this site

resilience of our woodlands. This is resulting in woodlands becoming less diverse in their tree and shrub species composition, inhibiting regeneration of existing woodlands making them vulnerable to disease and climate change and reducing final timber crop value by up to 30-50%.

The Lake District High Fells include England's three highest massifs (Scafell, Helvellyn and Skiddaw) and are home to a range of diverse habitats including heathlands, acid grasslands, blanket bog and important populations of arctic-alpine species such as alpine saxifrage, alpine mouse-ear and alpine catchfly. There are remnants of various types of woodland and scrub including Atlantic oak woods, juniper scrub and montane willows. Most of the best areas for wildlife are included within the 27,000ha Lake District High Fells Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The High Fell have the potential to deliver a range of public benefits including biodiversity, filtration of water, moderation of water flows, helping to reduce landslips, carbon storage and capture, contributing to health and well-being and are part of the area's natural beauty, landscape, history and culture.

However, over grazing by herbivores (including sheep and deer) has an adverse impact on biodiversity, particularly grazing outside of the growing season, leading to a decline in habitat condition. On the ground observations and deer census survey data suggests that where agri-environmental stewardship grazing regimes have been reviewed, to reduce sheep numbers to promote the natural regeneration of upland features, there has been a marked increase in deer numbers. If left unmanaged deer can impact on the regeneration and recovery of important habitats.

20.7% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the national park are in favourable condition and 38.3% are unfavourable but recovering. Deer grazing is listed one of the key issues relating to the management of designated sites such as SSSI and SAC because of the adverse effect browsing deer have on the species and habitat features of a site.

1.2.3 Traditional Farming Practice

A distinctive feature of the English Lake District World Heritage Site and Special Quality of the national park is the agro-pastoral system. This includes the continued practice of communal grazing on unenclosed commons and fells managed through traditional practices, including communal gathering; a learned behavioural ability in sheep to recognise where they could roam (hefting); and the practice of landlords' flocks. Reductions in stocking densities are often a requirement of agri-environmental schemes to allow for nature recovery. Where significant numbers of wild deer are present within an area covered by an agreement sheep grazing densities often need to be adjusted. If deer are not controlled effectively then lower sheep densities are required to further reduce grazing pressures and ensure agri-environment nature recovery objectives are met. This can have an adverse effect on the viability of upland sheep farming and our unique farming heritage and therefore a negative impact on the special qualities for the Lake District National and attributes of Outstanding Universal Value of the World

Heritage Site. Grazing regimes need to support the restoration of rich environments that characterise the uplands.

The need for more effective wild deer management was recognised in 2023 by the English Lake District WHS Steering Group. Their guidance document ***Nature recovery, deer management, and management of fell-going sheep flocks,*** recommends:

> *(4) A more coordinated and targeted approach to deer management is required, with an initial focus on the North Lakes, but with a need to expand pan Park.* ***A pan Park Deer Management Group would be beneficial to coordinate activity between the existing local wild deer management groups and better manage sustainable deer herds (population and distribution).*** *Non-native, invasive species should be more effectively controlled.* ***Each partner should be asked to (a) further effective deer management on their property, including the removal of barriers to their management; (b) openly share information on deer populations and deer impact assessments, and (c) assist in the development of markets for venison****. FiPL and other partner grant funding mechanisms should assist effective management. Further studies on wild deer population and modelling and population dynamics should be sought.*

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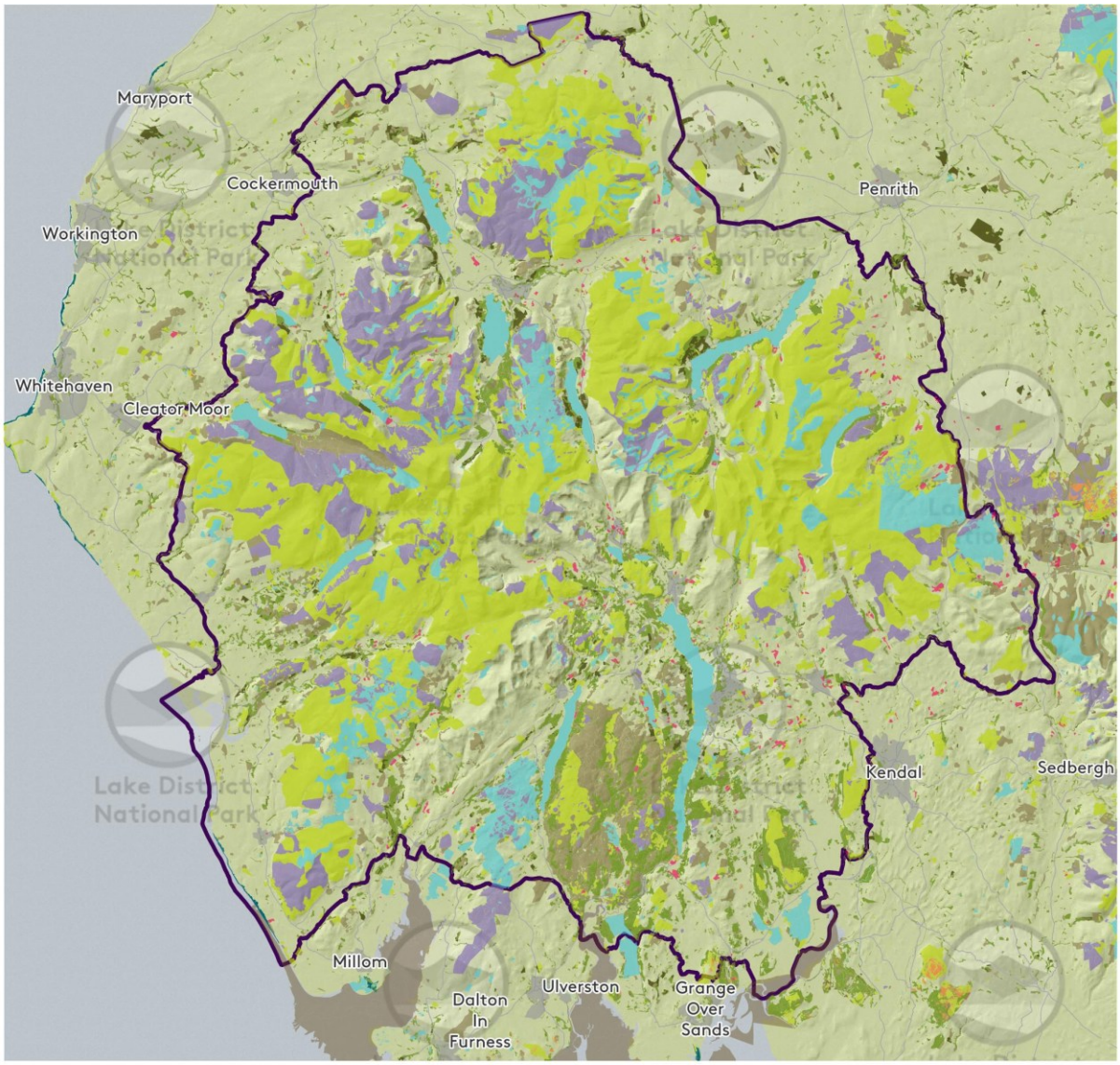
Map 1: Lake District Habitats (taken from Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Network Habitats**)**



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Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Network Habitats

- Ancient Woodland
- Woodland and Parkland
- Grassland and meadows
- Upland hay meadows
- Heathland
- Limestone pavement
- Pond, River, Swamp, Fen, Bog
- Maritime cliff and slope
- Rock and other habitats
- Lake District National Park boundary

Centre of map: NY 3023 0781

N

0 5 10 km

1.2.4 Public awareness

Wild red deer have a prominent public profile in the National Park and people have an emotional attachment; often visiting to specifically see this iconic species. Negative public perceptions regarding shooting, culling and other activities often leads to controversy surrounding control and management.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that public access has increased significantly in recent years and the visitor season has lengthened leading to additional disturbance to herds. Managing deer numbers can be extremely challenging given the terrain and extent of territory involved and increased disturbance from recreational access can increasingly complicate activities such as stalking a herd.

The public are often unaware of the importance and requirement for management. Research by the Forestry Commission suggests that improved public education would be beneficial, increasing public understanding of management practices.

1.2.5 Deer Management Groups (DMGs)

The DMGs are fundamental to delivering effective wild deer management on the ground. There are four active, voluntary wild deer management groups in the national park:

- North Lakes Red Deer Group
- West Cumbria DMG
- Eden Valley DMG
- South Lakes DMG

(Bowland Deer Management Group does not sit within the national park but acts as a 'buffer zone' for the resident sika population. Currently all DMG's are working towards preventing sika/red deer hybridisation within the pure Lakeland red deer herds).

DMGs cover most of Lake District's upland wild deer range and adjacent land. Each group comprises of representatives from landholdings within the group's area. The diversity of owners and their management objectives within groups is increasingly varied.

The absence of a national deer strategy has resulted in a lack of a consistent approach with regards to monitoring and managing wild deer and control is carried out to address specific issues in localised areas rather than promoting a joined-up approach between wild deer managers and the DMGs.

DMGs often lack support to help them secure advice and resources required to deliver a coordinated approach towards wild deer control at a landscape scale.

North Lakes Red Deer Group

North Lakes Red Deer Group manages the bulk of the red deer population within the national park and covers an area of approximately 35,872 hectares (358.7 km²), or 15%

of the overall Lake District area. The red deer, known as the Lake District herd, is thought to be one of the purest red deer herds in mainland Britain. The herd has been well documented for over 200 years in terms of its importance and uniqueness and has been cited within the valley descriptions for the Cultural Landscape World Heritage Status inscribed by UNESCO in 2017. The group comprises of the National Trust, United Utilities and several private estates, who all employ a combination of estate stalkers, contract stalkers, stalking tenants, and stalker assistants in undertaking the cull within the project. The group works collaboratively with guidance from Natural England. In recent years the group has worked with Natural England to look at how deer management can support the delivery of SSSI condition objectives delivered through agri-environment schemes.

Photo by Mike Childs

Map 2: Voluntary Deer Management Group Areas across Cumbria and the Lake District

Recreational stalking

Recreational stalking is often associated with the targeting of larger males or trophy hunting, but these groups are increasingly becoming more involved in the delivery of effective deer management and contribute to the archiving of cull numbers in the National Park. However, recreational stalkers are reported to be mostly absent from the established DMGs.

Forestry England observations suggest that where landowners are proactive and engage with the DMGs the governance of the group is supported and improved and a collaborative approach is achieved.

1.2.6 Landowner involvement

The control of wild deer is only the responsibility of the landowner on whose land the deer are on only for as long as the deer are located on that land. Therefore, landowners are able to manage deer as they see fit, and in ways that deliver their own management and business plans. All landowners and land managers have a responsibility to undertake deer management, and although some deer management is targeted and effective there are areas in the national park where no significant deer management is undertaken.

Landowners are sometimes unaware of their responsibility regarding deer management on their land and as seen above (see 1.2.5), and have no involvement with the DMGs. North Lakes Red Deer Management Group are an example of where landowner involvement is proactive and landscape scale management is achieved through a collaborative approach.

There is no consistent approach to deer management across the National Park. Some larger estates such as National Trust, United Utilities, Lowther and Graythwaite employ Deer Managers to work across their land holdings on a landscape scale and conduct population and census modelling, setting and delivery of cull targets, based on survey and monitoring data.

1.2.7 The Lake District National Park Wild Deer Management Steering Group

The Lake District National Park Wild Deer Management Steering Group was established in 2023 to examine the current issues relating to wild deer management in the national park and recommend interventions to address and promote sustainable wild deer management, including the preparation and delivery of a parkwide wild deer management strategy and to respond to the governments evolving deer management strategy. Representation includes the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Forestry England, National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, United Utilities and the North Lakes Red Deer Group.

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1.2.8 Research and Monitoring

In order to implement effective and targeted control consistent monitoring of deer populations is required to provide data to enable more accurate planning of the type of animals to be culled, as well as the numbers to be culled.

There is a considerable need to develop understanding of wild deer, and the best methods of management for a sustainable population. There is no consistent approach to collecting and collating data on wild deer. Therefore, there is no reliable data on exact numbers and how they impact the National Park. There is a belief that deer contribute to the grazing pressure on important habitats but there is no firm evidence of this. For example, very little information exists on the extent of and population size of roe deer in the National Park.

Drone surveys are providing more accurate data sets on deer numbers and spatial concentrations, allowing traditional on foot counts to be “ground truthed” for accuracy. They are able to provide more accurate data in hard-to-reach locations and cause very little disturbance and displacement.

Further research is required on wild deer populations and population dynamics.

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1.2.9 Marketable brand

There is a renewed public demand for venison as it is increasingly being seen as a high-quality protein, sustainable source of meat. This presents a great opportunity to develop a market for a ethical, locally sourced, carbon positive, sustainable Wild Lake District venison brand.

From land to larder. Deer management activities, such as stalking and culling present many challenges, including the complex and difficult terrain, extent of territory, and the paradox of weather (bad weather stops work due to poor visibility and good weather encourages more people leading to more disturbance). In some areas improvements need to be made to support deer management activity and encourage the move towards making deer more viable as a marketable product. This includes:

- Improving uplands access routes for the extraction of deer carcasses to enable stalkers to bring carcasses down from the uplands to larders and on as a marketable product.
- The provision of more centrally based deer larders and processing units to enable sales direct to the supplier.

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2.0 Achieving the ambition: what is our desired result

The ambition of this strategy is to establish an approach to the sustainable management of wild deer, at a "whole" landscape scale, balancing public interest, nature recovery, and the cultural integrity of native wild deer in the Lake District landscape.

In order to address the issues raised in section 1 "**the current reality"** the strategy has identified five core aims through which to deliver actions, against a set of guiding principles, over a 5-year period, to achieve the ambition.

Better Communication	Promote better understanding and support for deer management in the national park.
Greater Collaboration	Support and improve a collaborative approach towards the management of wild deer at a landscape scale.
Impact focused	Promote an adaptive management approach to allow impact assessments to directly inform management.
Robust Data and Evidence	Develop strong evidence base and pan-Park baseline to inform targeted management decision.
Marketable Lake District Venison Brand	Develop a market for the sale of Lake District venison.

The core five themes will facilitate the following headline outcomes:

- Ensure that wild deer management is incorporated into future ELMs agreements and increase land holdings in agri-environment schemes that support the management of wild deer.
- Secure investment and create incentives to financially support the control deer populations.
- Establish a pan-Park deer number baseline and set population parameters to achieve realistic and appropriate sustainable deer numbers.
- Create a Lake District World Heritage Site (WHS) brand for wild venison and deliver actions to create a viable, ethical and sustainable venison product
- To protect red deer from hybridisation and prevent encroachment from non-native deer species.

Achieving the outcomes will be challenging and require a coordinated, collaborative approach involving a wide range of stakeholders, including private and public landowners, land managers, deer managers, deer stalkers and the public.

Funding and investment is vital to deliver the ambition for this strategy and therefore it is important to explore all appropriate funding sources, both short-term and long-term, to ensure that management of wild deer populations remains a priority.

Regular collaboration between statutory agencies such as National Parks, Forestry Commission and Natural England and key stakeholders such as private and public landowners, farmers, deer managers and deer stalkers is essential.

Knowledge sharing and dissemination of best practice will be required to maximise the impact of the actions undertaken.

3.0 Actions

The ambition is to establish an approach to the sustainable management of wild deer whilst preserving the balance between public interest, nature recovery, and the cultural integrity of native wild deer in the Lake District landscape. This will be achieved through the following thematic actions :

The steering group, facilitated by the Lake District National Park Authority, will oversee engagement and delivery of the actions outlined below. Leads and timelines for each action will be identified and defined via the steering group and stakeholder groups.

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Table 1: Actions

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Theme	Aim	Actions	Measures of success

DRAFT

Better Communication	**Promote better understanding and support for deer management in the national park.**	• Increase public awareness around the impact of wild deer on biodiversity and need for management through the launch of a public relations campaign, promoting the benefits of responsible management of wild deer populations by 2030.
		
		• Provide interpretation on site and at information hubs on the importance and delivery of deer management activity.
		
		• Strengthen working relationships with public and private landowners, land managers, deer managers and farmers through holding events to raise awareness and encourage collaborative, landscape scale wild deer management.
		
		• Increase the number of land holdings in agri-environment schemes to support management of wild deer.
		
		• Engage with Government to encourage the publication of a National Deer Strategy.
		
		• Influence the creation of an outcome-based scheme and investment for deer controls and incentives to control deer species and numbers.
			• PR impact is not directly quantifiable – various methods will be used to measure the impact of public relations
			  • Number of press articles
			  • Social media reach and engagement
			  • Media content analysis
			  • Website traffic
			  • “Brand” mentions
			  • Website backlinks
			
			• The creation of an outcome-based funded scheme to incentivise the control of deer species and numbers.
			
			• The publication of a National Deer Strategy.

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Theme	Aim	Actions	Measures of success
Greater Collaboration	**Support and improve a collaborative approach towards the management of wild deer at a landscape scale.**	• Create a Lake District Deer Management Forum to increase collaboration between private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers • Ensure the incorporation of deer management plans into all relevant ELMs agreements. • Identify and support opportunities to improve training and promote career incentives to the number of well trained, employed professional deer stalkers and deer managers across the National Park. • Support local deer management groups towards improved secretariat and membership. • Secure funding for a Lake District wild deer management coordinator.	• Future ELMs agreements will contain the requirement for deer management plans. • All four Lake District based deer management groups have a secretariat.

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Theme	Aim	Actions	Measures of success
Impact Focused	Promote an adaptive management approach to allow impact assessments to directly inform management.	• To work with graziers to achieve well-considered grazing levels (stocking calendars) tailored carefully to suit the habitat type that deliver a range of outcomes alongside maintaining rural traditions and economy. • To develop management plans which encompass an adaptive impact management approach – using impact assessments to drive management rather than an over -reliance on cull targets. • To ensure that emphasis is placed on stakeholder involvement in management and shared learning among scientists, managers, and stakeholders.	• A visible reduction in over-grazing pressures of key habitats targeted in agri-environment agreements.

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Theme	Aim	Actions	Measures of success
Robust Data and Evidence	**Develop strong evidence base and pan-Park baseline to inform targeted management decision.**	• Undertake a literature review from existing research to determine what a sustainable population of wild deer in the Lake District looks like (if necessary Commission a research report into the above) • Develop shared evidence base to support grazing regimes that enable nature recovery as part of a profitable and sustainable farm business. • Develop a knowledge network to enable the sharing of information, best practise in data collection and support with the analysis and interpretation of results to help inform control and management decision. • Establish pan-park data and information that can also be submitted to any future government's national deer population dashboard .	• The establishment of a pan park population baseline for wild deer numbers and distribution. • Populations of sika deer in the Lake District and boundaries are monitored and managed in order to preserve the genetic integrity of native red deer populations.

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Theme	Aim	Actions	Measures of success
Marketable Lake District Venison Brand	**Develop a market for the sale of a Lake District venison.**	• Establish a Lake District World Heritage brand of wild venison (or Cumbrian / Lake District quality assurance scheme). • Provide more centralised larders and processing units to encourage sharing of facilities and enable sale direct to the supplier. • Explore the processing of waste products into food pellets (non-human consumption). • Identify where traditional upland access routes for wild deer management are located and support their improvement whilst avoiding adverse impacts on the landscape. Additionally consider provision of new access routes. • Develop a market for a healthy, carbon-positive, locally sourced and environmentally sustainable product to promote to the catering trade and the public.	• Creation of a Lake District World Heritage brand of wild venison. • Increase in the sales of locally supplied venison.

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Appendix 2: Feedback from the Lake District Wild Deer Management Strategy Workshop (Rheged) – 17 October 2024

Four facilitated discussion themes taken from the strategy:

1.	**Better Communication** Enhance knowledge and awareness on why we need to manage deer in the national park.	Facilitator Joe Groom (Forestry England).
2.	**Greater Collaboration** Advocate for a collaborative approach towards the management of wild deer at a landscape scale	Facilitator: Alastair Boston (Forestry Commission)
3.	**Robust Evidence** Develop strong evidence base to help inform targeted management decisions.	Facilitator: Bill Kenmir (RSPB).
4.	**Marketable brand:** Develop a market for the sale of a Lake District venison	Facilitator: Jo Sheenan(RSPB) .

Better Communication	
Action (included in the strategy)	**Feedback**
Increase public awareness around the impact of wild deer on biodiversity and need for management through the launch of a public relations campaign, promoting the benefits of responsible management of wild deer populations by 2030.	• Provision of on-site interpretation boards and include information in Tourist Information Centres on the impacts of deer and management important but also the impacts that the public might have on the delivery of deer management activity. • Joined up approach across the National Park. The topic needs to be included as apart of all environmental education package and then linked across educational providers – needs to be a funded project. • Public perception of deer management is slowly changing and it is important to use to use this make the General Public understand deer manage and why culling has to be carried out. • RSPB, NT, LDNP and others often steer away from publicising deer management to help protect membership or reputation, the communication could be better and increased. The use of careful messaging communicated in the right way e.g. not just “in your face culling”.
Strengthen working relationships with public and private landowners, land managers, deer managers and farmers through holding events to raise awareness and encourage collaborative, landscape scale wild deer management.	• IT and other census methods across the park should be joined up and even made mandatory with numbers then shared. • Small land owners can often not help with communication when it comes to landscape deer management, it can be very difficult to work across a number trying a achieve a goal. • There are major issues with communication of DMG’s. • Funding needed to support groups such paid secretary/chairs. • DMGs: NGO’s, land owners, other parties need to attend - not just stalkers and don’t have lots of small groups. • Administration in organisations, groups and strategies is important and needs to be funded to help increase communication.

Increase in the number of land holdings in agri-environment schemes to support management of wild deer.	• This action seems to be pointless and could be removed due to most if not all schemes are not related to deer management.
	• FC need to promote WS1 scheme across the area. • What happens to the data? What's it used for? • Could it help coms across the NP? • As above agri-enviro schemes don't work for deer management? NE/FC/PRA don't seem to link up and work alongside one another at times, often relating to land ownership/deer management.
Set up a framework with which to deliver the government's national wild deer strategy.	• The Government and NGO's need to be better joined up and have a clear goals to target management.
Influence the creation of an outcome-based scheme and investment for deer control as an incentive to control deer species and numbers.	

Better Collaboration	
Action	**Feedback**
Create a Lake District Deer Management Forum to increase collaboration between private and public sector landowners, land managers, deer managers.	• Identify missing landowners and focus areas. • Need collaboration with shared facilities, such as regional units and community deer larder. • Create a co-operative. • Collation of data from monitoring should be shared widely. • Could the smaller estates in an area work together (with encouragement). • Improved processing / working together could impact on the price (positively).
Ensure the incorporation of deer management plans into all future ELMs agreements.	• Not enough financial incentives. • Better plans for managing bracken as cattle grazing is not working. • More consistency and better liaison between FC and NE etc. • More flexibility in CS agreements for wild deer management. • Need cross boundary working – scalable through ELMs agreements. • Deer are missing from most schemes – more awareness is needed.
Identify and support opportunities to improve training and promote career incentives to the number of well trained, employed professional deer stalkers and deer managers across the National Park.	• Shooting licenses and seasons need to be resolved by government. • No mention of poaching in the strategy. • Need to increase diversity of people within the stalking industry. • Need more local courses to be more successful. • Education about careers in deer stalking – viable career choice. Promote benefits and other activities – not just shooting. • Investigate how people can train as venison butchery. • Central butchery location – Crooklands??
Support local deer management groups towards improved secretariat and membership.	• Organise an annual DMG meet up to share information and progress on pan-park scale. • Could ELMs schemes support local DMGs. • Paid role to support all the DMGs and facilitate the bring big organisations and land estates together.

Robust Evidence	
Action	**Feedback**
Commission a research report into population dynamics and grazing patterns to determine what a sustainable population of wild deer in the Lake District looks like.	• All agreed evidence is very important. • Numbers are difficult to measure – impacts of wild deer are easier to monitor. • Numbers might help set direction of travel but the impacts help plan management .effectively, target management needs and monitor success. • Evidence is important but should not be a precursor for delivery. • As evidence for policy advocacy. LDNP and NE/FC well placed to lead on centralised aspects.
Develop shared evidence base to support grazing regimes that enable nature recovery as part of a profitable and sustainable farm business.	• Need evidence systems that work in woods and open ground. • Numbers are important but impact assessments vital to relate to management.
Develop a knowledge network to enable the sharing of information, best practise in data collection and support with the analysis and interpretation of results to help inform control and management decision.	• Shared/pooled evidence is important. • Data on herd health valuable - larder metrics can help. • Commissioning a report is good idea – including literature review. • Need for standardised approaches to evidence gathering and data management. • Can be part of the storytelling (including marketing).
Preserve the genetic integrity of native Lake District red deer populations.	• Genetics important but not well understood.

Marketable Brand	
Action	**Feedback**
Develop a market for a healthy, carbon-positive, locally sourced and environmentally sustainable product to promote to the catering trade and the public.	• Changing perceptions of venison itself: not just for eating out – more of an everyday meal. • Public view of deer: 'Bambi Effect'/'Disneyfication' of nature. • Access to tips and recipes on how to cook – social media, papers, radio etc. • Change perception of venison as a meat – 'dry, tough, gamey'. • Wild/free range/sustainable/low carbon/low food miles – good selling points – 'greenest meat you can buy'. • Value of product needs increasing! (every group bought this up) • Game dealer rates too low. • Lack of game dealers. • Many game dealers not taking roe deer as not worth the effort for meat yield. Sensible prices needed for consumer to encourage sales. • There must be incentives in place to cull more deer (often came down to price again). • Public transparency at all parts of the chain needed – from culling to end product. • Marketing – more funds needed to reach people who wouldn't normally eat venison. • Professionalism/highest standards/auditing needed – peace of mind for public. • Ethics of eating venison – veganism – animal welfare and climate change. • Anything that adds value is the KEY. • Hospitality market fluctuates – affects venison market/costs. • Oversupply has negative effects – especially during peak season. • Venison needed in schools – change attitudes at early stage, educate. • Storytelling important.

Provision of more centralised larders and processing units to encourage sharing of facilities and enable sale direct to the supplier.	• More central drop off points/central processing units/mobile larders needed. • A larger network of larders needed. • Could waste be turned into pellets.
Identify location of traditional upland access routes for wild deer management are located and number of routes requiring improvement and provision of new access.	• Carcass extraction often an issue – more routes/equipment/vehicles needed. • Pony extraction as an alternative/green way to extract and employs local people.
Establish a Lake District World Heritage brand of wild venison (or Cumbrian / Lake District quality assurance scheme).	• Brand recognition important – 'Lakeland Venison' was suggested. Label/assurance scheme mark important/reassuring. • Brands work with the public when they have a personal connection to them (e.g. Herdwick). • Assurance schemes good