

Assessing the effectiveness of deer management grants in the East of England

This research analysed a new grant scheme introduced by the Forestry Commission East of England in 2008 which provides payments for deer management and monitoring of the impacts of deer. It found that the grant has been taken up by a wide range of land owners and that it has facilitated a more professional approach to deer management. The change in deer impacts on woodland brought about the grant are unclear at this stage. Conclusions are that the grant should continue and be expanded.



'We were doing [deer] stalking but the grant has concentrated our minds and, I think, made it more professional, more coherent in its planning. It's taken it to a new level' (Woodland owner).

Background

There have been long-standing concerns about the number of deer in the East of England and their increasing impacts on the condition of woodland. In response to this, in 2008, the Forestry Commission East of England opened a new grant scheme providing increased support for deer management in the region. This introduced two novel mechanisms: 1) payments for deer management ('stalking') time and 2) a deer impact monitoring scheme. Forest Research were commissioned to undertake an analysis of the first five years of the scheme to assess its contribution to the provision of public benefits.

Objectives

This research aimed to identify those involved in the scheme, the impact of the scheme on approaches to deer management, and change in the presence and impact of deer in the region.

Methods

Deer management plan documents were assessed along with data relating to past and current culls, deer presence and impact. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with grant recipient owners and estate managers, forestry agents, stalkers and key public officials (for example, from the Forestry Commission and the Deer Initiative). Observations of deer were made using thermal imaging in three study areas. Deer population densities were then estimated using distance sampling.



Findings

The grant has been taken-up by a wide range of land owners. Forestry agents have been key to the dissemination of information about the grant. This has enabled forestry agents to bring expertise about deer management into conversations between land owners and deer managers. This can trigger a more 'professional' and 'targeted' approach to deer management. 90% of grant recipients were culling deer prior to applying for and receiving the grant. The grant has therefore had the effect of concentrating deer management efforts amongst owners. Both the number of deer culled per year and the average number culled by each grant recipient per year has increased overall.

Results from the thermal imaging survey revealed substantial variation in deer densities in different parts of each of the three study areas. Interviews with land owners indicated that this was a reflection of the stalking effort that had been applied on different land holdings. However, the effect of culling pressure on woodlands was less clear. Analysis showed no correlation between the cull and damage, nor between the trend in cull and damage - this may be a reflection that deer are also using farmland besides the woodlands. A response to the increased culling pressure is ultimately to be expected.

Policy Recommendations

- The current grant scheme should be continued and expanded;
- Seek to increase the available expert resource to deliver the grant; and increase uptake of the grant amongst medium and small land owners;
- Neighbouring landowners should be encouraged to cooperate to achieve a more uniform reduction in deer numbers;
- Consideration should be given to the interaction between the grant scheme and collaborative culling efforts;
- Consideration should be given to the implications of introducing payments between owners and deer managers.

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Reports and Publications: Dandy, N. & Gill, R. (2013) Assessing the Effectiveness of Deer Management Grants in the East of England. Forest Research, Alice Holt, Farnham.