

**Deer/Vehicle Collisions and Road Safety
9th July 2004, The Verderer's Court, Lyndhurst, Hants.**

**Notes from a Workshop organised by
The Deer Initiative in association with
Highways Agency**

Attendees:

Dorset Deer Dispatch

FC Thetford

National Forest

National Trust

Deer-UK & MOD Deer Management

Avon & Somerset IDP

FC Forest of Dean

Corporation of London – Epping

British Deer Society

East Sussex County Council

Ashdown Forest

Deer Study & Resource Centre

Gloucestershire CC

Hampshire County Council

FC New Forest

Bucks CC – Chilterns Traffic Management

FC Cannock

BASC

RSPCA

Highways Agency

Dorset Police

FC – Forest of Dean

Hereford County Council

Professor Rory Putman – DI Deer Collisions Project

Jochen Langbein – DI Deer Collisions Project

The Workshop commenced at 10.00am with an introduction from Tony Sangwine.

Jochen Langbein gave an overview of the Deer Collisions project and its aims and objectives, together with a summary of preliminary findings to date. He also discussed the situation in the nine major forests in England of direct local concern to many of the day's delegates. A copy of his presentation is available for download or viewing by clicking on the link on the following website page www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/html/rta.htm

Rory Putman presented an introduction to available mitigation measures, experience in continental Europe and North America of the effectiveness of the different types available, their costs and cost effectiveness. A copy of his presentation is available for download or viewing by clicking on the link on the following website page www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/html/rta.htm

A number of discussions followed focussing on the effectiveness of different mitigation measures.

FENCING

It was agreed that highway fencing will probably always remain one of the most effective methods of reducing deer related traffic accidents, but only where it is employed to lead deer to find other, safer places to cross the carriageway itself, or through over- or underpasses, rather than employed to try and create a complete barrier to prevent crossing altogether.

In the Epping Forest area the use of fencing on the M25 and deer crossings above and below the motorway have been very successful in reducing accidents, and it has been found that deer in the area have adapted increasingly well to use of these measures first put in place twenty years ago. Occasional problems occur with the public leaving gates open, and apart from the cost initial installation, such fencing carries an ongoing costs relating to maintenance. Breaches of the fencing have been relatively rare, and the ranger recalled only needing to attend to about four deer collisions inside the motorway fencing over the past twenty years.

All agreed however that attention should be given in new fencing schemes to the provision of one-way gates or deerleaps at regular intervals, to allow deer which do get onto the road in fenced areas (perhaps via the ends of the fence line) to escape back out of the carriageway

MANAGEMENT OF ROADSIDE VEGETATION

There was also discussion on the benefits of cutting back verges, particularly where scrub has developed close to the road edge. With reference to the A35 south of Lyndhurst area, it had been noted that cutting back the verge had allowed for better visibility for both deer and drivers, with an apparent reduction in deer collisions. However, the point was made that verge cutting must be done at the right time of the year (i.e. autumn) otherwise there is a risk that the re-growth will be attractive for grazing by deer as well as New Forest ponies, and could have the opposite effect to that intended.

REFLECTORS

Experience of the effectiveness of reflectors remained inconclusive, with most of those present not convinced of a sustained effect in terms of accident reduction, though it remains unclear whether this is due to poor maintenance of surrounding vegetation, poorly sited reflectors or habituation by the deer. The Epping area has also had good results with deer reflectors installed 3 years ago, and although it was suggested that if other measures are in place then reflectors should not be needed, it was felt that if they were sited carefully near major crossing points, and maintained regularly then they may be of some use.

SIGNAGE AND SPEED

It was felt generally that the use of signage could be improved both in terms of the number of signs on a given route and also of the type used. It was agreed that on known high risk routes, more signs needed to be placed along the length on the route, rather than a single sign warning of danger for the next xx number of miles. The comment was also made that speed is a key factor and that it doesn't matter how many signs are in place if drivers travel too fast; research has shown that small reductions in average speed do not necessarily reduce the overall frequency of collisions with deer, but reduce the proportion of the most serious accidents.

It was thus suggested that wildlife warning signs should more generally be accompanied, where possible, by appropriate traffic calming measures, particularly those aimed at reducing vehicle speed. It was suggested that different types of signage, including dynamic digital signs advising drivers of excessive speed or forewarning of animals on the road, could be used along the route to prevent driver complacency.

Comment was made that too many signs in the wrong place can create a 'cry wolf' scenario with the result that drivers then see signage as meaningless even when it is correctly located. One additional problem here is that while the standard Highway Code wildlife warning sign shows the picture of a red stag, the same sign is used for dangers from wildlife in general.

It was generally agreed that increasing driver awareness is extremely important – the general public don't usually spot deer even when they are quite close to the roadside.

The comment was made that accidents frequently happen in the same place, and therefore local monitoring would allow mitigation measures to be better sited or improved, where they will be of most use.

REPORTING OF DEER-VEHICLE COLLISIONS

There was also a discussion about the recording of deer related RTAs, with the comment that record keeping remains particularly variable between police forces. The meeting was advised that sometimes accidents occur without witnesses, and although the accident could often be attributed to likely wildlife involvement because of the absence of any other contributory factor, it will not be recorded as an animal related RTA because there is no evidence at the site of the incident. This was seen as a problem with data collection generally, in that the data submitted are often too vague, and the number of records where conclusive records of involvement of deer or other animals exists will always tend to underestimate true numbers of wildlife collisions.

LUNCH BREAK – 1.00pm

The afternoon session started with visits to two underpass sites in the Lyndhurst area.

The first site near Rufus Stone provided one of several examples of narrow underpasses built beneath the A31 dual carriageway primarily to provide for passage by New Forest ponies, cattle and pedestrians. Although deer may use the underpass occasionally, its narrow dimensions (c. 3 m) in relation to long length of c. 30 m are not inviting for deer; aside from greater width of the underpass, better landscaping, planting and fencing to help funnel deer towards the entrances would all increase likelihood of use by deer.

A second underpass site visited to the south of Lyndhurst passes beneath the A337, and also had not been built specifically for deer; however, here fresh deer footprints (slots) leading to and from both ends of the underpass indicated regular recent passage by fallow and smaller deer. Although width and height of the underpass were no greater than at the first site, it's shorter length, a part soil rather than concrete base, and more sheltered and landscaped entrances all combine to make the route more inviting for deer. In addition local deer density at the second site is rather higher than near the A31.

RETURN TO VERDERER'S COURT

2.50pm

The afternoon session continued with open workshop discussions.

CONTROL OF NUMBERS

There was a rather more general discussion about reported increase in deer population numbers and damage caused by deer within England and Wales. However, it was pointed out that size and density of deer populations, as well as considerations of impact, were extremely variable and that the majority of population increases and 'problems' caused, were highly localised in nature. Thus considerations of 'national' population statistics were largely irrelevant and probably counterproductive, since it distracted focus from more site specific, local problems. It was also stressed that discussions of deer densities and impact should be species specific.

Concern was expressed that the problem of deer-vehicle collisions was exacerbated by continual changes in the rural environment and habitat, with increased public access to rural areas and the subsequent movement of deer in particular where dogs are left off the lead. There were also increasing numbers of traditional town dwellers moving to rural areas who don't want to see deer numbers controlled. It was also suggested that RTAs were reduced during the FMD period because there were less members of the public on rural areas and therefore deer did not roam as much.

It was emphasised that deer density was only one of many factors which affect the likelihood of traffic accidents – and that other factors such as traffic speed, roadside vegetation cover, and other aspects affecting deer and driver visibility were probably as significant. In consequence, local reductions in deer populations might not always have a great effect on accident risk/frequency, and published work from studies in Europe and North America suggest that it has been effective in some cases but by no means in all. Wider geographic reductions of deer numbers in the New Forest as a whole however, was reported to have been accompanied by some reduction in the annual toll of deer-related RTAs.

DIVERSIONARY FEEDING AREAS/VISITOR MANAGEMENT

Comment was made that if areas are opened up for deer, visiting members of the public may take over and push the deer into other areas, possible verges or gardens. However, it was generally agreed that open spaces do work when they are created away from areas open to public access – although of course this is not always possible.

DEALING WITH DEER RTAs

Some areas have experienced local difficulties with police call out systems in that personnel move around fairly frequently and it is therefore difficult to establish good long term contacts. It was pointed out however, that Dorset police have a call-out system which is able to call on a large number of approved operators and which has worked well over several years, and provides a good model for other forces. Another example of a well running call-out system is provided by Avon & Somerset Injured Deer Policy (A&SIDP), which has been developed in close liaison not only with the County Police Force, but also Local authorities and landowners, and has looked carefully into the many issues surrounding firearms permissions, and health & safety in relation to dealing with injured animals at the roadside.

Suggestion was made that each affected region could establish its own Dispatch Team. If this was done, consideration should be given to the following points:

- gaining permission from local authorities
- carrying out a risk assessment
- awareness of legal issues
- acquiring suitable insurance cover

Concern was expressed of the need to be aware of Food Standards Regulations when dealing with RTA carcasses. The health status of a carcass following an RTA cannot always be determined – there is therefore a potential danger of a diseased carcass getting into the food chain.

It was suggested that perhaps there was a need for national guidance to be developed covering points such as:

- details of how the system is set up
- who co-ordinates the system
- who deals with injured animals
- how do they qualify to do this
- what guidelines do they operate under

It was pointed out that Chief Constables for each police force are autonomous and are therefore only concerned with RTAs in their area. However ACPO have produced some guidance on setting up response systems and the DI is pursuing this with individual Chief Officers.

Information was given on a new training course for operators which has been set up in response to a request from FE England for a standard course relating to dealing with RTAs. The course will cover many aspects including legislation and Health & Safety issues, but is only available to FE rangers at the moment. Comment was made that operators do not necessarily have to be stalker orientated.

Examples of other deer call-out situations aside from RTAs were given including a deer trapped in a school, in a motorbike shop, and also an incident of a deer impaled on 10ft security railings. Clearly each incident requires a different approach which does not include only stalker skills. With regard to roadside dispatch following an RTA, it was said, particularly with respect to urban areas, that the RSPCA does not have enough trained staff to cover all incidents.

Comment was also made that members of the public involved are often very unhappy to see injured deer destroyed after an RTA, even though in the very great majority of incidents this will be the most humane option; animal/vet programmes on TV have tended to create the false believe among the public that most animal casualties can be saved and returned to the wild.

THE WAY FORWARD

It was agreed that the main objective is to make roads safer for deer and road users alike.

Proposals suggested included national retro-fitting of underpasses or overpasses where problems are most severe, but that this would be too costly as a universal measure. However, it was pointed out that not all mitigation is cost prohibitive not least if set against the costs incurred by wildlife collisions. For example, roadside vegetation management aimed at providing better visibility for drivers and deer attracts moderate additional cost over and above such maintenance required for other reasons. Purpose built green bridges and also wide underpasses may only occasionally be justifiable, but enhancement of existing underpasses to make them more suitable for use by wildlife, and improvement to existing warning signs, may provide cost-effective options in some areas. Perhaps the cheapest option which might nonetheless be rewarded with significant reduction in accident frequencies on less major roads would be better targeting of conventional signage, *combined with mandatory speed restriction* and electronic matrix at moderate cost reminding drivers travelling in excess of those posted speed limits.

The way forward therefore could be to encourage adoption of some of these options for high risk collision areas and it may be worth approaching local councils as a starting point.

Representatives from a number of local authorities commented that there are already too many demands on budgets at local level to fulfil even present targets for improvements, and funding for such initiatives may not be possible.

Suggestion was made that some measures could be undertaken by using local volunteers at no cost, but comments generally were that although the voluntary sector could be useful in some cases, the matter was a government issue and not a local deer management issue.

It was generally felt that more advice could be given to land managers on preventative measures. The Highways Agency intends to produce an Advice Note entitled 'Highways and Deer' within the next year or two, when the Deer Collisions project should also be completed. Also, The Deer Initiative was discussing producing an Advice Note provisionally entitled 'Woodland Design for Land managers' which would incorporate a section on roadside design.

CLOSING

In closing the meeting, it was agreed that there was an obvious need to work together to alleviate the problem of deer related RTAs.

Thanks were given to Tony Sangwine for chairing the discussions, and to the Highways Agency for helping to fund the meeting.

Thanks were also given to Jochen Langbein and Rory Putman for their presentations, and also to Martin Noble and FC for use of the venue.