

Anger over SNH plans to cull Rum's deer

ONE of the world's most important red deer herds is to be culled by two-thirds, angering conservationists.

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has decided to cull the 1,000-strong herd on Rum to prevent them damaging more than 750,000 trees which are to be planted on the Hebridean island.

However, conservationists claim there is no need to kill the animals because they could be fenced off from the ash, pine and hazel trees used to create new woodland habitats.

The herd is regarded as unique by animal ecologists. Because they live on an island the deer are thought to be genetically pure and have been studied by scientists since the 1970s.

The animals have yielded insights into the breeding habits of red deer, their behaviour and their interaction with the environment. A vast collection of antlers and DNA has been collected, allowing experts to trace the animals' ancestry over several generations.

"The red deer research on Rum is of world significance

Mark Macaskill

and we have objected to this idea," said Hugh Rose, of the British Deer Society.

"Why don't they plant the trees somewhere else in Scotland where deer aren't being researched? The idea was that Rum should be an open-air laboratory. Now SNH has decided there should be community woodlands but that's not what you do on an open-air laboratory.

"There are ways of avoiding killing the deer by using fences. It's not difficult, there are no capercaillie or black grouse on Rum that might be injured by fences."

It is estimated that 300,000 red deer — the largest mammal in Britain — live wild in Scotland. The species is regularly culled to minimise the destruction of woodland.

Rum was bought by the Nature Conservancy Council — now SNH — in 1957 and is one of Scotland's finest nature reserves. The island is a haven for birds and animals including sea eagles, deer,

goats, otters and seals. A lot of the island's vegetation and forests were destroyed during the 18th and 19th centuries by landowners so as to create a sporting estate. Deer were then encouraged to multiply and devastated swathes of woodlands.

The herd on Rum has provided valuable information for a study, due to be published later this month in the scientific journal *American Naturalist*, showing that "ungulates" such as deer, gazelle and reindeer can influence the gender of their offspring.

While a known characteristic in bees and wasps, it is the first conclusive proof of the trait in mammals. The red deer on Rum yielded some of the best data, according to Dr Stuart West, an evolutionary biologist at Edinburgh University who led the study.

"There has been a lot of doubt on this issue for many years but we've cleared it up by reviewing the vast amounts of data collected over the years," he said. "It is true that strong mothers are much more likely to produce sons."

SNH has rejected the criticism from conservationists. It said that fences are not an option because they would look "artificial". But it added that some deer would be spared allowing research to continue.

The plans would also create new jobs and increase the number and diversity of bird and plant species.

"We have to restore biodiversity and that will involve reducing deer numbers," said Calum Macfarlane of SNH. "We understand the concerns about this work, it is quite a radical change to what has been the status quo on Rum for some time.

"But it will take place gradually over a number of years and a sustainable population of deer will be maintained."

Richard Cooke, secretary of the Association of Deer Management Groups, said: "From the point of view of the deer industry, Rum has been a unique source in terms of our understanding of Scotland's red deer population and indeed global research. It's regrettable but I would hope due thought is given to the potential loss of a key scientific resource."



Paul Tomkins

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