



Case Study 3: Wild deer – a recipe for success

The Deer Initiative and Mark Burrage

Economic development, with environmental and health spin-offs



Achievements

Increasing numbers of deer are damaging the region's woodland and the Deer Initiative has been set up to oversee their effective and humane management. In South Norfolk one entrepreneur has established a successful business to use the by-product of this management – venison.

Norfolk countryman Mark Burrage has created a strong, vertically-integrated business that covers the gamut of deer management including: provision of deer management plans for landowners; superintending deer culls; preparing and then packaging wild deer products; and finally taking these to market.

Over the last 5 years his business has grown twenty-fold, selling venison direct to the public at Farmers' Markets under the Bluebell Woods brand name, or indirectly through farm shop outlets and the catering trade. Repeat custom is demonstrating that the value of wild deer as a healthy food is increasingly understood – not only is it low in fats and high in Omega 3 but also extremely easy to digest, so it is beneficial to the young and elderly alike.

Background

Three of the East of England's wild deer species have reached unsustainable proportions and are causing unacceptable levels of damage to woodland ecosystems and forest crops (estimated at up to £10 million per year). They are one of the main causes for some of the East of England's most important woodland sites ("Sites of Special Scientific Interest") being in an "unfavourable condition".

Initiative description

To combat this it was recognised a direct and robust deer management policy is required. To that end Natural England and the Forestry Commission established the Deer Initiative and, subsequently in 2005 in the East of England, the Regional Deer Forum. This broad partnership of statutory, volunteer and private interests is dedicated to delivering a sustainable and well-managed deer population. A series of Deer Management Groups monitor local populations and prepare local plans for woodland protection and deer management.

Lessons learned

Damage to farm and woodland crops are steadily being reduced – but it will be a long haul. On the other side of the equation, venison sales are rising as local meat sold through local outlets proves to be an increasingly popular consumer concept. But, to create a significant long-term market for venison requires much more than selling – continuity of supply and product quality is just as important as ongoing consumer education to deliver the wild deer health message.

Future developments

Mark has recently successfully diversified into venison pie production and, although shifting to a more seasonal sales pattern, he expects to keep his use of regional venison high.