Together we can do better than this

Utilisation of wild deer in Tasmania

1.0 The situation

Wild deer in Tasmania have become a serious problem. Anecdotal evidence shows numbers have exploded in recent years. A study conducted in 2015 estimated that unless management practices are changed, by 2050 there will be 1 million wild deer in Tasmania (Potts 2015). The deer range is expanding. Deer have been sighted in World Heritage Wilderness areas.

Deer are listed as a partially protected species under Tasmanian government regulations. Permits are required to shoot them and significant amounts of government resources go to enforcing this permit system. To date deer control has relied on recreational shooters culling deer under these permits. A condition of these permits is that the products from the culled animals cannot be sold commercially. In-spite of extensive lobbying, the government has no immediate plans to change this situation.

1.1 The costs of wild deer

There is no formal study available estimating the cost of wild deer to the Tasmanian economy. The below is an attempt to put a figure on this in the absence of any other data.

1.1.1 Impact on Farms

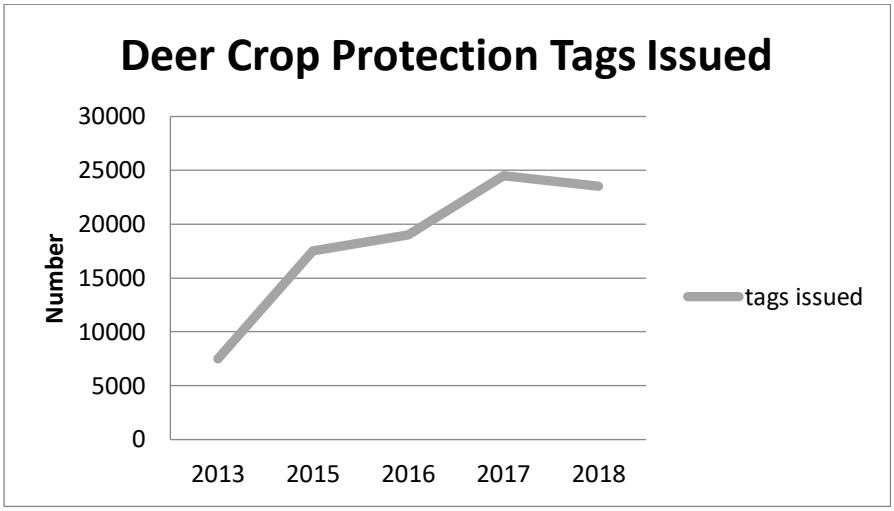
In dozens of conversations with Tasmanian farmers during 2019 a range of estimates of the productivity loss from deer have been cited by individual enterprises. These vary from $50,000-$200,000 per farm per year. Many of these conversations quoting these figures are presented at www.wecandobetter.com.au. These figures are simply direct financial loss from crop damage or lost grazing. They do not include damage to fences, time in having to comply with deer regulations or other incidental costs associated with wild deer.

Deer cause the most significant farm economic impact when:

a) grazing fodder crops specifically planted for winter grazing or pastures set aside for the same purpose. In these situations the crop can disappear within a week under grazing by large free ranging mobs of deer. It is not uncommon for the deer to move from one crop in a district to another through a season. Once a crop is consumed by deer, farmers can be forced to buy expensive fodder supplements in order to keep stock alive.

b) grazing or trampling damage to high value crops such as poppies. During late winter-early spring farmers regularly lose tens of thousands of dollars overnight to mobs of deer invading such crops.

In 2015, 459 individual farms were issued 751 deer crop protection permits (DPIPWE 2016). The government cannot update the figure for the number of farms issued permits in recent years, but as the graph below shows the rate of increase in crop protection tags since 2015 has been dramatic. In 2018, 872 permits were issued, using the same ratio of permits issued per farm as in 2015, then the 2018 figure of 872 permits issued equates to 532 farms with deer problems.



Using the limited available data it's possible to calculate a range of estimates of deer direct costs to Tasmanian agriculture.

Number of farms affected by deer	Annual productivity loss/farm	State wide productivity loss
532	$25,000	$13.3M
532	$50,000	$26.6M
532	$75,000	$39.9M

Deer also cause farmers financial loss through fence damage, time, loss of trees planted in re-vegetation projects or shelter belts and other incidental costs. It's reasonable to put these at an average of $5,000/farm per year, adding a further $3M to the statewide annual cost.

1.1.2 Impacts on the forestry industry

No reliable data is available isolating the cost of deer to the Forestry industry. However each major forestry company spends considerable dollars each year on game control in general. Of all the problem game animals deer are anecdotally the most troublesome for the industry.

1.1.3 Impacts on the community

- Deer are becoming an increasing hazard to motorists. RACT data reports 37 deer collisions since 2014. The RACV puts the average insurance claim for animal collisions at approx. $4500 in 2016 (https://www.racv.com.au/about-racv/our-business/media-releases/risk-of-animal-collisions-increases-warns-racv.html) . This does not account for personal injury nor lost employment. Regional hospital staff report treating patients for deer collision injury at an increasing rate.

- Other incidental costs to the community from deer include tree degradation and other environmental costs, impacts on farm bio-security and costs to the government in administering the system which protects deer.
- Landcare Groups consistently report there are many re-vegetation projects which simply don't get off the ground because the cost of protecting the young tree growth from deer is too high.
- Deer have been sighted in World Heritage Wilderness areas. Some commentators are describing them as one of the most significant current threats to Tasmanian bio-diversity.

1.1.4 The Level of Waste

Many culled deer are simply shot and left to rot.

Interviews with farmers indicate that something like 30% of all deer culled are simply left to rot. In addition extensive reports exist of farmers conducting large culls outside of the permit system, with these animals buried in pits. The numbers of wasted animals may be as high as 15,000/year, culled in order to protect farm enterprises and wasted for want of any commercial use.

2. The Benefits of Commercial Use

2.1 The Wild Venison Market

Tasmanian companies have large existing markets for venison. One such company, Lenah Game Meats, needs 200 t of venison per year to satisfy existing demand. This equates to all the meat from 20,000 Tasmanian deer. This is currently sourced from interstate wild deer harvests and New Zealand.

Commercially utilised, deer can return anywhere from $100-300/head depending on targeted markets.

2.2 Agricultural Benefit

Large scale commercial use will reduce the impact of deer on farms, especially with timely delivery when deer are invading crops. One of the principal benefits is simply to disperse deer away from high value crops to lesser value grazing. Little data on such benefits is available, however it is fair to suggest large scale commercial harvesting could reduce farm losses by 25%. Based on the data above this equates to a benefit to the State of $3-10M/year.

2.2.1 Benefits of commercial shooting for reducing farm loss

a) Commercial shooting on any one property is delivered by one or two individual professional shooters operating at night using spotlights. Recreational shooting depends on larger numbers of shooters, often as many as 20-30 per property operating for short periods. Co-ordinating the activity of a few commercial shooters is significantly easier and more flexible than large numbers of recreational shooters.
b) Commercial professional shooters operate throughout the working week. Recreational shooters in general are only available on weekends.
c) Commercial professional shooters have an economic incentive to shoot as many deer as possible for as long a period as possible.

When a farmer notices large mobs of deer invading a crop, minimising the damage is reliant on quick control, something more easily effected by contacting one commercial shooter. Whilst reducing numbers directly reduces impact, intensive shooting also disperses deer, driving them off high value crops to other areas.

3. Economic Loss from Commercial Use

3.1 Recreational Shooters

If large scale commercial use occurs it need not cause any reduction in economic activity associated with recreational shooting. At present many thousands of deer are shot and left to rot and of those utilised a large proportion simply become dog food. Commercial use would not prevent recreational shooters obtaining the deer they wish for personal use. Properties with good relationships with recreational shooters would maintain these connections. Commercial use simply does not have the capacity to 'decimate' deer herds. There will be no reduction in overall economic activity as a result of large scale commercial use.

3.2 Farmed Deer Industry

Tasmania does have a very small deer farming industry. It processes about 600 animals per year delivering 6 t of meat. This figure has been declining for many years. It has existing markets for the small number of animals it produces.

Wild harvested venison is a very different product to farmed venison and would be marketed as such. In addition, existing demand from Tasmanian companies amounts to 200 t/year, way in excess of anything a deer farming industry in Tasmanian is capable of producing.

4. Commercial Use Controls

4.1 Industry Standards

Wild deer are harvested and processed for human consumption in Qld, NSW, Vic, SA and many other countries. The regulations controlling this are contained in *The Australian Standard for the Hygienic Production of Game Meat for Human Consumption*. These are a national standard which all game meat operators must adhere to. They include traceback mechanisms, animal welfare standards (all animals must be head shot) and product hygiene monitoring.

Existing Tasmanian game meat processors operate under this Standard producing high quality products from wallaby and other animals. Exactly the same standards of production will apply to deer.

4.2 Cultural Impacts

Commercial harvesting of deer cannot decimate deer populations and leave nothing for recreational shooters. Deer are a highly flighty animal which quickly disperse under intensive shooting. If numbers reduce to the level where a commercial shooter cannot get 20 or 30 animals per night he will move on to a different location. Commercial shooting can help control deer populations and prevent crop damage, but it won't decimate them.

The existing crop protection system offers the government the capacity to restrict cull levels if deer numbers fall to the point where they are impacting on recreational shooters.

5. What needs to change?

The only impediment to commercial use of wild deer in Tasmania is a licence condition of deer cull permits. This could be removed at the Ministers discretion. Existing game meat processors are currently operating under the Australia Standard and therefore capable of producing wild harvested venison immediately.

Existing markets for product are in place and more could readily be found. Wild harvested Tasmanian venison is a very marketable product.

6. In summary

Wild Deer in Tasmania	The Cost	The Opportunity
Agricultural Productivity Losses	$13 to $40M/year	
Agricultural Incidental Costs	$3M/year	
Forestry Industry Losses	Unknown	
Public safety, environmental damage, government administration costs	Unknown	
Wild Tasmanian Venison Sales		$3 to $6M/year
Improved Agricultural Productivity		$3 to $10M/year
Reduced Impacts - Forestry		Unknown
Reduced Agricultural Ancillary Costs eg fence repair		Unknown
Reduced Road Accidents		Unknown

The estimated total net gain to the State is over

$15 million/year.

This can be achieved without any government support or expenditure.

References

DPIPWE (2016) Submission to Legislative Council Government Administration Committee A: Inquiry into Wild Fallow Deer

Potts, J.M et al. 2015. Predicting the future range and abundance of fallow deer in Tasmania, Australia. Wildlife Research 41(8)