

Deer Have The X-Factor when it comes to Scots.

The Scottish public has once again voted deer as the type of wildlife they most associate with Scotland.

In an Autumn 2011 survey commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), 1055 people were asked for their views on species, habitats and wildlife management.

A total of 73 per cent chose the deer as Scotland's most iconic animal, 2 per cent up on last year's figure.

Golden eagles (27 per cent), grouse (26 per cent) and red squirrels (25 per cent) also ranked high in the ratings as did salmon (20 per cent) and Scottish wildcat (15 per cent).

Unsurprisingly, most people were concerned about the future of the red squirrel (37 per cent), under threat from the non-native grey.

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association is delighted that deer have once again been recognised as the species evoking the greatest sense of nationhood in people.

However, there are concerns that questionable culling practice on land promoted for conservation casts doubt on whether conservation bodies have the same respect for deer as the Scottish public.

"Deep down, I think some of the conservation bodies have a fear of deer," observes SGA Chairman, Alex Hogg.

"If they see one, they fear that will turn quickly into 50 and they are frightened to manage at the level we manage at, or they don't have the expertise. They are more likely just to kill them rather than taking the responsibility for their management."

With such affinity for deer amongst the Scottish people, the SGA Chairman believes we should make more of this majestic animal in terms of creating a wildlife experience for visitors.

Next year has already been declared as the year of Natural Scotland by national tourism agency, VisitScotland.

"There seems to be an agenda as regards deer but there should be places where you can park a coach so people can look into a corrie with their binoculars and see the deer in front of them; watch them and listen to the rut. It is an amazing experience. It would be like a safari tour in Africa. Sadly, it doesn't happen.

"There should be places where you can take your children to see deer. Hopefully there is a change of mind-set so that can be the case in the future."

It seems deer have always held a place in the heart of Scots men and women.

The antlered mammals were viewed as a creature of nobility in Scots Gaelic poetry.

In 1789, Robert Burns wrote of his admiration for deer- and possibly stalking- in his famous song, 'My Heart's In The Highlands'.

*My heart's in the highlands, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the highland, a-chasing the deer'
Chasing the wild deer, and following the roe,
My heart's in the highlands wherever I go.*

Good Morning

According to a recent survey from Scottish Natural Heritage, the deer is the animal that seventy three percent of us link most strongly with Scotland.

But more than half of us are not comfortable with them being hunted.

Well, growing up on the Isle of Lewis I used to be a stalker's ghillie, bringing the carcasses down off the hill with a pony.

Now at fifty-six I'm living in Glasgow, but a couple months ago I succumbed to an urge to go back to my old job. Tommy Macrae, the keeper who once trained me, has since gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds, but his widow invited me to stay, and I spent a week with her son who's now taken over.

I confess to huffing and puffing up the hills, but what I saw left me persuaded that deer hunting as we have it today is part of animal welfare.

The point is that stags don't wear condoms! If the herds aren't culled for meat, they slowly starve in winter, and it's a sorry sight to watch them stumble on incredibly skinny legs along the shore, scraping for seaweed to survive.

The week I went back to my old job I worked with four stalkers. These men had an incredible respect and even reverence for the land. Back at the larder after the day's work we'd raise a glass, and the toast would be: "To the Soul of the Stag."

She's a Godly woman is old Tommy's widow who looked after me, and that makes me think how Isaac said to Esau in the book of Genesis: "Bring me venison ... that I may eat, and bless thee before the Lord before my death."*

There you see the cycle of life, blessing and death. We and the deer are interdependent, bound up in the balance of nature.

That's why I'm pleased to hear that a new study reveals the deer to be our most iconic animal.

I raise my glass: "To the stalkers of Scotland ... to animal welfare ... to the Soul of the Stag."

* - Genesis 27:7, KJV



To The Soul of The Stag

In recognition of the Deer's iconic status, Lewis-born broadcaster and author of 'Soil and Soul', Alastair McIntosh (pictured), has kindly given permission for the following to be reproduced in Scottish Gamekeeper.

Alastair's reading was inspired by his early life as a stalker's ghillie in Lewis and the good people- and standards- he met on returning to his old haunts last year. It appeared on BBC Scotland's 'Thought For The Day', 25th November 2011.

