Deer farming in the UK

Steadily growing demand for venison is fuelling a significant rise in farmed deer numbers. Market analysts have confirmed this growth in venison consumption. Kantar Worldpanel (2014) reported an increase of over 400 percent in UK venison sales and Mintel (2015) identified venison as a "star performer", with growth expected to continue until at least 2020. Venison has become a "must-have" for supermarkets during the last decade, with one supplier to a single multiple retailer constructing a dedicated abattoir and cutting plant for farmed deer in 2018.

Because wild venison cannot always provide the consistency demanded by modern retailers, and as there are limited prospects for increasing the supply of wild deer meat, farmed venison provides the only opportunity to increase supply. A large proportion of the venison retailed in UK supermarkets is imported from New Zealand deer farms.

The New Zealand influence in British farms

Many of the techniques for farming red deer were developed in Scotland as far back as the 1970s and 80s, but few deer farms were established because subsidies favoured conventional agricultural sectors, and because the market for farmed venison was in its infancy and under-explored. These constraints did not exist in New Zealand and deer farming developed rapidly with around one million deer now on their farms and many deer units carrying over 1,000 deer. UK deer farms benefit significantly from techniques that have evolved in New Zealand.

Although venison has always been the principle driver for New Zealand deer farming, the growing antlers of deer are amputated annually for sale into the traditional oriental medicine market. This by-product provides around 15 percent of their industry sales.

The removal of growing antlers was made illegal in Britain by a Schedule 3 Amendment Order (1988) to The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. This prohibits "the removal (otherwise than in an emergency for the purposes of saving life or relieving pain) of any part of the antlers of a deer before the velvet of the antlers is frayed and the greater part of it has been shed".

UK deer parks

Britain, and especially England, is unique in having a large number of traditional deer parks, often established centuries ago, which provide a highly valuable and distinct habitat. In addition, many more recent deer enclosures have been established to provide amenity value and as zoos and wildlife parks. Deer within parks have to be culled to avoid overstocking and this is done by skilled marksmen and women with the carcasses processed in the same way as wild deer, through Approved Game Handling Establishments.

Park deer are predominantly fallow (Dama dama) but frequently include red deer (Cervus elaphus) and sika (Cervus nippon) as well as occasional other species. In addition, there are now many business enterprises carrying reindeer (Rangifer tarandus), catering for the Christmas demand in town centres, etc. Reindeer have their own health problems associated with the milder climate in southern Britain, to which they do not seem to be well suited.