



Deer Poaching and Food Security

Tanya Wyatt

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In the UK, tens of thousands of deer are poached annually. This has significant implications for the sustainability of British deer populations and human health.

Recessions and economic slumps have effects on various aspects of people's security and presumably, people's food security is a part of this. In order to cope with food insecurity, some people may steal food or other items for money to buy food, but there is also the possibility that some people will turn to poaching. The British Deer Society places the number of poached deer in the UK as high as 50,000 each year yet in 2009 only 335 incidents were reported to the police.

In 2013, I undertook a [study](#) to gather information as to whether deer poaching in the UK is linked purely to economics or if people who poach deer have other motivations beyond food or money. I sent online questionnaires to all police constabularies and the questionnaire was advertised in the monthly publication of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. I received responses from 27 wildlife crime officers and six gamekeepers. Drawing on Nurse's (2013) [typologies](#) of wildlife crime offenders, I asked respondents about the change in poaching around the time of the 2008 recession and about their perspective on the motivations of poachers. The four typologies consist of traditional profit motive, external economic pressure, masculinity and as a hobby. In particular, the traditional profit-driven motivation of offenders was explored by attempting to uncover if there is, as suspected, a black market in venison. From this data, I hoped to create a more detailed picture of deer poaching and to further inform wildlife law and poaching prevention.

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UK deer poaching: why it matters

Understanding more about deer poaching is important for two main reasons. The first is in relation to human health. Presumably, experienced hunters are trained to inspect the deer they kill or poach for diseases. There is the possibility though of poachers infecting themselves with Bovine Tuberculosis or Foot and Mouth disease, which are known to occur in deer in the UK, though no data indicating deer meat has been found with these diseases. Additionally, if the poacher is selling the meat on the black market, there is the further possibility that any disease could be passed on to other people and the public.

The respondents suspected some poached deer meat makes its way to pubs and restaurants, so disease transmission to the public, whilst unlikely, is not impossible. The second point is in regards to the sustainability of deer populations. It is difficult to manage wildlife populations where there is a significant amount of poaching, such as is suspected in the UK. Hunting licences and potentially other management strategies, like culling, need to be grounded in accurate population numbers in order to not over-exploit the species in question. If too many individuals are killed through hunting and poaching, this could endanger the stability and survival of the population. With tens of thousands of deer potentially being poached each year, it is difficult to see how deer populations can be properly estimated and therefore managed.

The police and gamekeepers who responded stated there are individual poachers and groups of poachers who do so for profit and financial reasons. As suspected, poachers personally consume the poached deer, but probably also sell the meat to make money. This fits Nurse's (2013) first typology, 'Model A', where offenders are driven by traditional profit motives. 'Model B' wildlife crime offenders are also financially driven, but the pressure on the offender is from

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an external source like an employer. In the context of deer poaching, this helps to explain the poaching undertaken by some gamekeepers. Landowners pressure gamekeepers to maintain the landscape in particular way. The respondents indicated though there is more driving poaching than simply economics. Nurse (2013) proposes there are also offenders who do so to maintain or assert their masculinity, 'Model C', and those who offend as a hobby, 'Model D'. The data confirm these typologies. Men carry out nearly all poaching. Apparently, often these men poach together as a form of male bonding, as a form of 'sport', or as one respondent stated 'just for the hell of it!'.

Each of Nurse's (2013) typologies then were found within the respondents' answers. The implications of this are two-fold. First, deer poaching, and presumably other poaching, is not only driven by food insecurity and money and therefore the motivations, and uncovering those motivations, are complex. Even when money is at the heart of the motivation, there are further distinctions to be made. The food and/or profit from the poaching may be for an individual, for an organized crime group or for an employer. For non-profit driven poaching such as for status, sport and/or fun, the motivations can be equally challenging to uncover. Uncovering motivations though is an important and useful endeavour as this data can be used to improve policy and prevention strategies. Second, that motivations are varied means that policy and prevention strategies also need to be varied. To have policy interventions and wildlife law enforcement strategies targeted solely at food insecurity or profit motivations are likely to be ineffective.

Addressing the problem

Poaching, of deer and other non-human animals, must then be addressed through a multi-faceted approach. In the first instance, the punishment for poaching in the UK is not a deterrent and the risk of being caught or prosecuted is low (Nurse 2013). This is partly because wildlife crime is not a concern for most police constabularies and not an offense that is prioritized. Making the fines higher, sentences harsher and confiscation of poaching equipment mandatory may help to address this aspect. Nurse (2013) suggests banning hunters and gamekeepers who are caught poaching from being able to receive licences in the future and/or from working in the industry. Second, wildlife crime is viewed as a victimless crime. This is not the case. Deer are shot by bullets and arrows, trapped in snares and/or torn apart by dogs. People can potentially eat uninspected diseased venison.

The environment as a whole or at least the ecosystem where deer live can be disrupted by overexploitation – people and non-human animals are victims of this too from the loss of a healthy environment. Public awareness needs to be raised through concentrated media campaigns as to the value and impact of biodiversity and the environment. Whereas regard for the environment has increased in recent years, there is still much more to be done to increase the knowledge of our connection to the planet. Additionally, there should be wide spread information about the danger of consuming uninspected meat and venison. In conjunction with these strategies in times of particular economic hardship, extra support should be put in place to assist people who may poach because of food insecurity. Addressing the enforcement side of deer poaching can help to impact upon economic motivations. Changing the view that poaching is victimless may help to alter motivations related to status and sport.

Deer poaching and wildlife crime are worthy of being made more of a priority not only because of the victimisation to the non-human animals and the environment, but also because these crimes impact upon people and communities. A multi-faceted approach increasing the attention on and penalties for wildlife crime as well as educating the public to the nature and risks associated with wildlife crime are necessary first steps to reducing the harm and suffering linked to wildlife crime in general and poaching in particular.

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Tanya Wyatt is a lecturer at the University of Northumbria.

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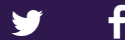


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