

Report

for the Minister for Arts, Culture
and the Gaeltacht

Monitoring of the Stag Hunts conducted by the Ward Union Hunt

K.W. S. Kane, Veterinary Inspector

16 May 1997

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(OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY)
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16 May 1997

Mr Michael D Higgins TD
Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht
Dublin 2

Dear Michael D

You will recall that earlier this year I agreed to your request to make available a veterinary Inspector of my Department to undertake monitoring of the activities of the Ward Union Club.

I now enclose a copy of a report on monitoring undertaken by the Veterinary Inspector involved (Mr. K.W.S. Kane). The conclusions in the report are as indicated the personal observations and conclusions of Mr Kane and are based on the limited monitoring that was possible in the circumstances under which monitoring was undertaken.

You will no doubt take the content of this report into account in your deliberations in relation to future licensing of the Ward Union Hunt. If you consider it necessary, we would of course be willing to make Mr Kane available for further monitoring.

Yours sincerely

Ivan Yates
Minister for Agriculture, Food & Forestry

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Foreword

Hunting has been a human activity from the start of human existence and one can thus comprehend the atavistic thrill derived by modern Man from hunting in all its different forms.

As millennia passed hunts and hunting became entwined in the mythologies of different human cultures and ritualized hunts of different types evolved and became part of the traditions of those cultures.

Where hunting had an end result in providing food for human consumption then it was clearly part of the order in Nature. However as human society became less dependent on hunting for food some forms of hunting continued to be pursued merely for the pleasure derived by the hunters from the thrill of the chase.

Some modern forms of hunting such as fox hunting, hare coursing and carted stag hunting no longer have an end in the killing of a quarry for food but are pursued in a ritual wherein the means has become the end.

Carted stag hunting was devised some 200 years ago to provide a chase where wild deer were no longer available and might appear to be an anachronism in the modern world, but should not be condemned merely for so being as very many human activities are also ritualized and anachronistic and yet accepted as normal by society at large.

I leave a discussion on Ethics to those more qualified than I, but I believe it might be shown that there is some weight to the argument that humankind should not cause avoidable suffering to any sentient being and if stag hunting be condemned it must be for this reason alone.

K.W. S. Kane
Castlebellingham May 1997

1. Introduction

I was requested in late January 1997 to undertake monitoring of the stag hunts conducted by the Ward Union Hunt Club and to produce a report for the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht.

In the limited time remaining between that date and the end of the hunting season I followed six of the seven hunts held.

This monitoring was conducted at a time when a campaign against the Hunt was being orchestrated by a number of groups opposed to hunting, a large amount of news media attention had been generated and numbers of people unconnected with, and in some cases antagonistic to, the Hunt were following hunts. Despite this tense and volatile situation I encountered courtesy and civility from Hunt staff, members and followers during the first two hunts which I followed anonymously; thereafter, when my status was known, I encountered, in addition, co-operation and friendliness.

Following a hunt by motor car is not simple and is usually frustrating in the limited glimpses of the hunt that are obtained. As a result of this fact and that of my being able to follow only six hunts I am very conscious of the paucity of experience on which this report is based and regret that I was not allowed more time to conduct my investigations more fully.

Although I had had no prior experience of, nor connexion with, stag or fox hunting, I have done a considerable amount of wild fowling and some big game shooting and so cannot be accused of any particular antipathy towards stag hunting.

When I commenced this project I had absolutely no idea of what I would see or find; I have been objective in my assessment of what I saw and found and my conclusions have not been influenced by opinions voiced from either side of the debate.

I undertook this monitoring alone and so the observations made and conclusions reached in the report are my personal observations and conclusions and mine alone.

I am very conscious that my conclusions may have some influence on decisions which may eventually lead to a loss of much pleasure to a large number of people who do not believe that they might have been doing anything cruel; I regret that loss to those people and trust that they will accept that I arrived at my conclusions objectively and without bias and only after much reflection.

2. Object of Study

To monitor the stag hunts conducted by the Club, including, inter alia, the following specified areas of interest:

- 2.1. Health and condition of the stag before the hunt;
- 2.2. Health and condition of the stag after the hunt;
- 2.3. Treatment of the stag during the hunt;
- 2.4. Conduct of the hunt and its followers;
- 2.5. Impact of the hunt on lands including trespass or damage.

In addition to the above items I also addressed the following:

- 2.6. Transportation of the stags;
- 2.7. Repeated hunting of individual stags;
- 2.8. Recapturing of stags remaining at large after hunts;
- 2.9. Husbandry and record keeping at the Deerpark;
- 2.10. Attitudes and views of some groups opposed to stag hunting;
- 2.11. Some legal aspects.

Observations under each of the above headings are in Section 5 below.

3. Methods

3.1. Six hunts were followed by motor car in the company of the Hunt “followers”. The locations of the first two hunts followed were ascertained privately and they were followed anonymously; at the third I introduced myself to Hunt officials. The hunts followed were:

31st January at Ballymadun, Co. Dublin;

7th February at Stamullen, Co. Meath;

11th February at Garadice, Co. Meath;

14th February at Kilmoon, Co. Meath;

4th March at Ratoath, Co. Meath;

7th March at Rowlestown, Co Dublin.

3.2. High quality binoculars and a powerful telescope were used for observations.

3.3. Two visits were made to the Deerpark and kennels owned by the Club at Green Park. Dunshaughlin where the captive herd of Red Deer was observed, the husbandry was discussed and the handling facilities inspected. The hunting records for the 1996-97 season were also inspected.

3.4. Extensive discussions were held with Hunt officials, employees, members and followers.

3.5 Discussions were had with some farmers and landowners over whose lands hunts passed.

3.6. Discussions were held with two groups opposed to hunting.

4. A description of the hunt

4.1. Stags to be hunted

Two “stags”, which may be hinds, havers (castrated males) or stags, are transported in a two-compartmented trailer, or “cart”, from the Deerpark to the hunt venue. However if an outlier, i.e. a stag remaining at large from a previous hunt, is to be hunted, then only one stag is transported from the Deerpark. The stags have had their antlers removed the previous Autumn.

4.2. Release of stag and commencement of hunt

When a carted stag is to be hunted, it is enlarged, i.e. set at large, in a prearranged field at about 1.30 p.m. The released stag immediately bounds off and quickly disappears from sight. The pack of hounds, with three or four mounted huntsmen in attendance, and followed at some little distance by the field of riders, is led onto the trail of the carted stag, some ten minutes after its release, to commence the hunt. When an outlier is to be hunted its location is determined in advance and the hounds are led onto its trail to commence the hunt.

4.3. Progression of the hunt

The running hounds follow the scent trail of the stag on the ground and give tongue when they are on a strong trail. The hounds are closely followed by the huntsmen. The field, under the direction of the Master, follow directly where possible or by alternate routes where not possible. In the following of the hounds, fields are galloped across, ditches and fences jumped, roads crossed and recrossed, gates opened and some fences cut.

4.4. Capture of the stag

If the hounds catch up with the stag it normally stops running and stands at bay surrounded by the hounds and is then captured manually by the huntsmen or other members of the hunt. It is then put back into the cart which has been called to the scene, for later return to the Deerpark.

4.5 Hunting of a second stag

If the first stag hunted is captured or lost after a chase considered to have been too short, i.e. less than about 75 minutes, then the stag remaining in the cart may be enlarged to provide a further chase. Alternatively a nearby known outlier may be hunted for the second chase.

4.6. Duration and distance of hunts

Depending on how the stag runs, hunts may last for only 30 minutes or up to 3 hours or more. The distance covered by the hunt may be only a couple of miles or as much as 20 miles.

5. Results

5.1. Health and condition of the stag before the hunt

Four stags seen in the cart, and being enlarged, appeared to be fit and healthy. Six other stags also transported in the cart during the hunts also appeared to be healthy, insofar as could be determined by the limited observation possible.

Nervousness of stags in the cart prior to hunts was variable, some appearing calm and some appearing very nervous or stressed. At one hunt it was notable that of the two stags in the cart one, which had been hunted previously, was showing body tremors, excessive salivation and panting whereas the other stag, which had not been hunted previously, appeared relatively calm.

5.2. Health and condition of the stag after the hunt

As no stag was captured at any hunt which I attended, I made no observation of a stag after a hunt. However a farmer who saw, at very close range, the stag at bay on 7th February told me that it was bleeding from one leg; also I was informed by Hunt staff that some stags are given antibiotic treatment after hunts if they have injuries such as wounds or swollen limbs.

Captured stags are returned to the Deerpark where they are released into a small paddock, with a few of the herd that have been held therein, and are then held overnight for further observation next morning, and treatment for injury if necessary, before release into the large paddocks.

The non-capturing of stags at hunts where my presence was known to the Hunt may be significant. In fact the marked decline in taking of stags after the commencement of the adverse publicity at the end of December and consequent attendance at hunts by news media personnel and other people with cameras may be significant.

	Stags taken	Stags not taken
October to December	12	8
January to March	2	10

5.3. Treatment of the stag during the hunt

Stags are first hunted when between 3 and 4 years of age before which age they are not bold enough to face the hounds and are liable to run themselves to collapse and death. On the morning of the hunt, having spent his entire life until then in grass paddocks of 15 acres or less, surrounded by high fences the stag has been closed into the cart, out of which it can see through the ventilation slits, and transported to the hunt venue behind a motor car. When released from the cart he finds himself in a new and strange environment without his companions with whom he has lived all his life. Stags then run, apparently aimlessly, to and fro in fields until they find an escape route or decide to jump a hedge and then continue running in the next field or even along a road.

Of the six hunts followed, the average time from enlargement of the stag to abandonment of the hunt was 100 minutes, within the range 75 to 130 minutes.

As the chase is across country and as the stag doubles back and forth, it is virtually impossible to calculate how far he runs; however on two hunts on which the route of the stag was traced well on a half inch map, it was calculated that one stag had run at least 8 miles and the other at least 12 miles. The straight line distance on the map for five hunts between point of enlargement and point of abandonment of hunt averaged 4.4 miles, within the range 2 to 9 miles. On the hunt in which the straight line distance was 2 miles the stag had in fact run at least 8 miles and doubled back to within only 2 miles of the release point.

A stag which has been hunted before is, presumably, aware that he is about to be followed by hounds and runs from fear: indeed it is notable that the stag runs although the hounds are not yet on his trail. In the early stages of the hunt the stag runs constantly but as the hunt progresses he may stop running and hide or even lie down and it is at this stage that the hounds may catch up with him.

A major hazard encountered by stags is barbed wire. One stag was seen attempting to jump a very fence and getting his front leg caught on a top strand of barbed wire and hanging, thus suspended, for some seconds before his struggles and/or weight tore him free.

Stags are frightened by people and motor vehicles when they cross public roads, which they frequently do during hunts. Stags were seen running towards roads and then shying away from the traffic or people.

A stag observed, down to 30 yards range through binoculars, having run at least 8 miles in 90 minutes showed extreme physical distress, panting through its mouth and with a lather of white foam around its muzzle. This same stag, which had been hunted previously 17 days before, was apparently aware that he was being chased and, towards the end of a hunt in which the hounds had been hot on his trail for much of the time, was constantly raising his head and pricking his ears and listening.

I was informed by two eye-witnesses that hounds, although chary of a stag at bay, will attempt to bite him.

5.4 Conduct of the hunt and its followers

I observed nothing but good humour and politeness on the part of any member or follower of the hunts.

The enthusiastic following of the course of the hunt by Hunt followers, in 20 or more motorcars, around the roads, lanes and by-ways, constantly trying to be ahead of the hunt so as to see the stag or the field arriving at an anticipated viewpoint leads, on occasion, to blockage of narrow lanes or by-ways. This was never seen to be for more than a few minutes and Hunt followers appeared to be assiduous in keeping to one side of such lanes and of making room for local or other people using the lanes. During the six hunts attended the Dublin-Slane road was crossed three times by a stag and five times by the Hunt; the Dublin-Navan road was crossed once by stag and Hunt.

Any dangerous situations which I saw at these times were not due to any behaviour of the Hunt or the followers but due to aggressive and dangerous driving by some drivers who failed to reduce speed despite clearly visible activity ahead.

5.5. Impact of the hunt on lands including trespass or damage

5.5.1. Trespass

Certain farmers have given notice to the Hunt that entry to their land is not permitted. I observed a number of such prohibitions being respected; the hunts on 7th and 11th February were abandoned when the stags entered but did not re-emerge from prohibited lands. However as the stag goes where he pleases and the hounds follow his trail, on occasion, and perhaps inadvertently, trespass undoubtedly occurs onto land where the Hunt have not been formally prohibited entry but neither have been given permission to enter. On many occasions I observed huntsmen requesting, and receiving, permission to enter lands with hounds and only a couple of riders, the rest of the field being sent around by road or adjacent lands. I also observed huntsmen requesting, and being refused, permission to enter lands and consequently taking circuitous routes around the lands concerned.

5.5.2. Damage

Physical damage to the surface of pasture inevitably occurs consequent to the passage of 50 or more horses: this damage is, however, unlikely to be of any economic significance during dry weather. During or following wet weather, hunts are cancelled so as to avoid damage to lands; e.g. following heavy rain on 16th and 17th February, hunts were cancelled on 18th, 21st, 25th and 28th February.

Other lands liable to damage are those under Winter cereals or horticulture; When these are entered by hounds a couple of huntsmen follow, but the field, under the direction of the Masters, skirts the areas by riding around the headlands, i.e. field perimeters. However as hunts progress some riders fall behind the field and thus, being anxious to catch up and out of the realm of any Master, such riders, on occasion may cross unsuitable surfaces and cause some damage.

Damage to ditches or hedgerows through being jumped or crossed by horses is more apparent than significant.

Gates opened are closed by the last rider or by hunt followers.

Wire fences are sometimes cut by one of the Hunt officials permitted to carry a wire cutters. Such fences are repaired the following day by a team of volunteers who follow the route of the hunt for that specific purpose.

5.5.3. Impact on domestic livestock

Very few livestock are abroad during the hunting season but any which are are likely to become excited or frightened by the passage of the hunt. Particular risk categories would be pregnant mares or ewes. Horse owners are frequently aware of the hunts and keep pregnant mares indoors on hunt days. The Hunt keeps well away from flocks of sheep where possible, however some sheep farmers remain very anxious that the hunts should come nowhere near their flocks.

The early mild weather this Spring and consequent growth of grass led to cattle being set out earlier than usual in March and as a result of this the last two hunts scheduled for 11th and 14th March were cancelled.

The only disease which might be of significance between the stags and domestic livestock is Tuberculosis; with this in mind the herd in the Deerpark is TB tested.

5.5.4. Attitude of farmers

I believe that, with a few exceptions, farmers are tolerant of the hunts over their lands. This attitude may, of course, in some cases, be influenced by the very important collection service for dead or foundered animals provided by the Hunt. However it must be acknowledged that despite the general tolerance among farmers, a small number are strongly opposed to the hunt crossing their land; this opposition may derive from feelings of proprietorship and, in some cases, antipathy towards those perhaps seen as more privileged, rather than from any concern for the stag. By contrast many farmers invite the Hunt onto their lands and there are many farmers, both large and small, among the Hunt officials, members and followers.

5.6. Transportation of the stags

5.6.1. The Cart

This is a trailer of two compartments drawn behind a 4-wheel drive motor vehicle. The compartments are not large enough to allow the stags to stand in a natural position as required by paragraph 2(a) of Chapter I of the First Schedule to the Diseases of Animals (protection of Animals during Transport) Order, 1995.

5.6.2. The second stag

The second or reserve stag having already been transported to the Meet is then subjected to being carted at speed around the highways and byways for the duration of the first hunt in case the hunted stag is taken or in case the second stag is needed for a second chase. On one occasion I followed the cart at 60 m.p.h. along minor roads with very poor surfaces and many potholes for 38 miles while following the hunt.

The second stag is frequently a young animal taken out to get him used to travelling in the cart.

5.7. Repeated hunting of individual stags

According to the records maintained by the Hunt nine stags were hunted twice in the 1996-97 season at an average interval of 24 days, within the range 7 to 49 days. I was told that an older stag might be hunted three times in a season.

5.8. Recapturing of stags remaining at large after hunts

A significant number of stags are not taken at the end of the hunt. Some of these are subsequently hunted as outliers and may then be taken; others are captured when they return to the vicinity of the Deerpark and are lured in: others are captured by being immobilized by means of a projectile dart loaded with a narcotic drug. At the end of this season 13 stags remained at large. I was informed that between 5 and 8 stags from each season's hunting are never subsequently recaptured.

5.9. Husbandry and record keeping at the Deerpark

The Deerpark consists of a total area of 35 acres divided into 8 paddocks of various sizes. Stock held on 25th February was 25 hinds, 41 stags and 14 havers.

The breeding of replacement stock may not keep pace with the numbers of stags escaping from hunts and, to compensate, a number of young stags are bought in from commercial herds.

I was told that antlers are removed by the Veterinary Surgeon in the Autumn when the velvet has dried, however I believe that this procedure is actually done by Hunt staff.

I was told that hinds are rarely hunted, however this season, according to the records, six hinds were hunted. Hinds and havers are hunted in Autumn when the stags are in rut, at which time they are not in fit condition to hunt.

Stags are hunted until about 9 years of age at which time they may get "stiff" or fail in condition and I was told that they are then sold or exchanged with commercial deer farms or slaughtered for venison.

The mustering pens and handling facilities are in need of some improvement.

I was shown records of stags hunted for the 1996-97 season. However the accuracy of the identification system of eartags or else the record keeping is in doubt as I saw a stag enlarged and hunted which was not the one recorded for that day.

5.10. Attitudes and views of some groups opposed to hunting

[Material deleted on legal grounds]

5.11. Some legal aspects

As the Red Deer herd presently kept at Green Park by the Ward Union Hunt has been maintained in captivity for something in the region of 150 years and is augmented regularly by stock from captive herds farmed solely for venison production, it is hard to see how they avoid falling into the category of “domestic animal” for the purposes of the Protection of Animals Acts, 1911 and 1965 wherein “domestic animal” means “- - any other animal of whatsoever - - - species - - which has been - - sufficiently tamed to serve some purpose for the use of man”.

As the Red Deer at Green Park are obviously not wild animals it is equally hard to see how they fall into the ambit of the Wildlife Act, 1976 which specifically refers to “Wildlife” defined therein as meaning “fauna and flora”, the word “fauna” being further defined as meaning “wild

6. Conclusions

6.1. The hunting field is both a testing ground and a showcase for part of the Irish horse industry.

6.2. Large numbers of people from all walks of life associated with the Ward Union derive great pleasure from the hunts.

6.3. There is no intention of cruelty in the hunting of a carted stag on the part of the people involved most of whom have no concept that there is cruelty involved.

6.4. The transportation of the stags in the cart is inhumane in its manner and in the design of the cart.

6.5. The enlargement of the stags is inhumane in that they are ejected suddenly into a strange environment and alone.

6.6. A stag which has been hunted previously appears, before the hunt starts, to be distressed and aware that he is about to be hunted again.

6.7. Stags being hunted appear to be terrified of the hounds.

6.8. A stag is aware when he is being hunted and continues to flee even when the hounds are far behind. By contrast an outlier stag which is not being hunted will stand unmoving as the hunt passes; this behaviour is a normal survival mechanism in many prey animals.

6.9. Stags are sometimes wounded or injured during hunts by physical incidents or by the hounds.

6.10. Stags are terrified by people and motor vehicles during the hunt.

6.11. Stags are apparently distressed and exhausted towards the end of hunts and will hide and lie down at this stage. At the end of the hunt the fact that a man can catch and hold him would seem to be adequate evidence of physical exhaustion by the stag.

6.12. The handling of the stag when taken at the end of a hunt must be terrifying and stressful to the animal.

6.13. Domesticated Red Deer are obviously completely unfit for a prolonged chase by hounds. A recent scientific report in England has concluded that wild Red Deer are physiologically unable for a prolonged chase by hounds.

6.14. Hunting a carted stag with hounds cannot fairly be compared with what occurs in Nature as it does not resemble the natural relationship between Red Deer and Wolf.

6.15. A small amount of transient disturbance to farmers, local residents and motorists occurs during hunts; this is greatly exaggerated by those opposed to hunting and generally disregarded by others.

6.16. Some aspects of husbandry and record keeping at the Deerpark are in need of some improvement.

6.17. A strong campaign against this Hunt is underway and seems likely both to continue and to grow.

6.18. It could be argued legally, possibly successfully, that the stags are domestic animals and do not fall within the ambit of the Wildlife Act, 1976 and thus that the hunts contravene the Protection of Animals Acts, 1911 and 1965.

6.19. The report entitled "The Behavioural and Physiological Effects of Culling Red Deer" by Professor Bateson should be studied by any body deciding on the future of stag hunting with hounds. This report was made to the National Trust in England in March 1997.

END