

James Vestey

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Dear Lord Bonomy

I have been involved with the Jed Forest hunt since becoming a Joint-Master in 1991, a role I performed on and off for 15 years, I am the recently appointed chairman of the said hunt, so have seen hunting evolve from the old to the new system that came in post foot and mouth in 2002 (hunts having played a significant role in the livestock cull throughout the peak of the epidemic).

I farm 1250 acres in the Borders, carrying 1600 breeding ewes and 80 suckler cows, and the hunt are the only effective method of keeping fox numbers at an acceptable level that we have in our "tool box".

This is because we have large areas of gorse on the farm on the steepest slopes and the hounds are the only way we can drive foxes out of the gorse to be shot. In the Autumn when the hunting season starts we always have two or three early mornings to thin out the cubs and disperse them. This works really well but would not work with two hounds, because two hounds would not get the litters of cubs moving under sufficient pressure to drive them out of the large, dense areas of gorse.

Nor, unless it happened to be a still day (they seem rare), do two hounds provide sufficient noise to let the guns know which area they are in and we can soon find that the guns are in a different area to the hounds. A pack of hounds makes enough noise for everyone to know where they are, thus allowing the guns to be effective.

There would be no chance of successful fox control with two hounds in our scenario, which is by no means unique, and likewise no chance in the many large forestry blocks that make up the majority of our hunt country. What would be the point of putting two hounds into an 800-acre block of forestry? Very quickly you would not know where they were and there would be no chance of putting enough pressure on a fox, if they managed to raise one, to push it out to guns positioned at likely exit points; whereas a pack of hounds can fan out in these large blocks, pick up old trails where foxes have been, create enough sound to get said fox on the move and put enough pressure on them to break cover in the known likely exit points where guns are in place.

This was scientifically researched in the Borders and proven by scientists acting on behalf of the Federation of Welsh Farmers during 2012-13. There is absolutely no way anyone, any government or organisation could argue that two hounds could be effective or efficient in fox control in large forestry blocks or blocks of gorse such as we have. The farmers on the edge of these areas are the ones suffering lamb losses and are, virtually without exception, keen to have the hunt to keep the fox population at an acceptable level/density.

The 2014-15 winter was exceptionally mild and foxes had a tremendously successful breeding season. This has been reflected in the number of foxes found and shot during the 2015-16 hunting season. On one day in February 2016 the Jed Forest hounds accounted for nine foxes by flushing to guns in a small area with a lot of cover, but two hounds would have achieved very little in this dense glen over a much longer time-frame.

Guns sometimes wound foxes. On the day just mentioned foxes were wounded. The pack was highly efficient at dispatching these in short time. With two hounds it is doubtful that this would have been the case. The time delay would certainly have been longer and with only two hounds the wounded foxes would not necessarily have been dispatched at all. In country peoples' opinion this is unacceptable in terms of animal welfare.

Very few who live and work in the Scottish rural environment think fox control is not a necessity. As discussed above, flushing to guns is an important method in the armoury of ways to control fox numbers. This was accepted by SSPCA, LACS and IFAW at the time of the passing of the PWM (Scotland) Act 2002. Within the boundary of our hunt country the vast majority of farmers allow the hunt to carry out flushing to guns. If this was not working satisfactorily, having been in operation for fourteen years, they would not have allowed this to continue. There has been no public demand for changes to be made. Police Scotland and all the hunts have had a very good and open relationship since 2002. Over the last year matters have been agitated by the League Against Cruel Sports (LACS - based in SW England) due to events that brewed up in Westminster relating to hunting laws in England and Wales.

The Jed Forest hunt was founded in 1874 and has the smallest hunt country of the ten hunts in Scotland. It plays an active part in the community organising many events throughout the year to help raise funds to keep hunt staff, hounds, horses and hunt kennels in good order as well as donating significant proportions of money raised to local charities. This is not an easy task and it has taken time to rebuild following foot and mouth in 2001 and the PWM Act in 2002. Any unjustified amendment to the already robust Act would be hard for the hunt to survive.

Yours

James Vestey