



Venison Survey Report

Introduction

The meat from deer produced from the hillsides of Coigach and Assynt is free-range, low fat, and free from pollution and chemicals. The stalking of deer is a regular activity that takes place on each estate. Local deer management groups meet at least biannually to discuss annual culls and ideal densities of deer per square kilometre. These culling targets vary according to the objectives of landowners and their emphasis on habitat, tradition and economic drivers. In an area where the air is clean and water unpolluted, the venison produced locally is hill bred and when out-of-rut season, is of a high-quality. Through this survey we will try to see whether prices and availability reflect this.

Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape Partnership launched this survey as part of the Sustainable Deer Management Project. The aims of the survey were to:

- gauge how many people in the CALL area utilise this high quality, local food
- understand the barriers to choosing, buying and cooking local venison
- determine whether the local demand for venison is being met

As part of the survey, recipes from those who do use this meat were collected with the aim of compiling a local venison recipe booklet.

Through social media, Survey Monkey, telephoning, and Assynt News, 89 local people, approximately 7% of the local population of Coigach and Assynt, responded to this survey. The survey closed on the 31st of December. The winner of a prize draw was chosen from participants that took part and received a joint of venison.

GDPR

The survey results will be shared with participants who are interested, the local Deer Management Group (DMG) and CALLP. Any personal data supplied will be treated in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In accordance with this, the responses to the questions were treated confidentially and will remain anonymous. The results of this survey may lead to further initiatives that promote venison and recipes.

The Questions

Through our series of questions we tried to ascertain what preferences and eating habits people have and what the demand is for this type of meat.

Question 1: How often do people eat venison?

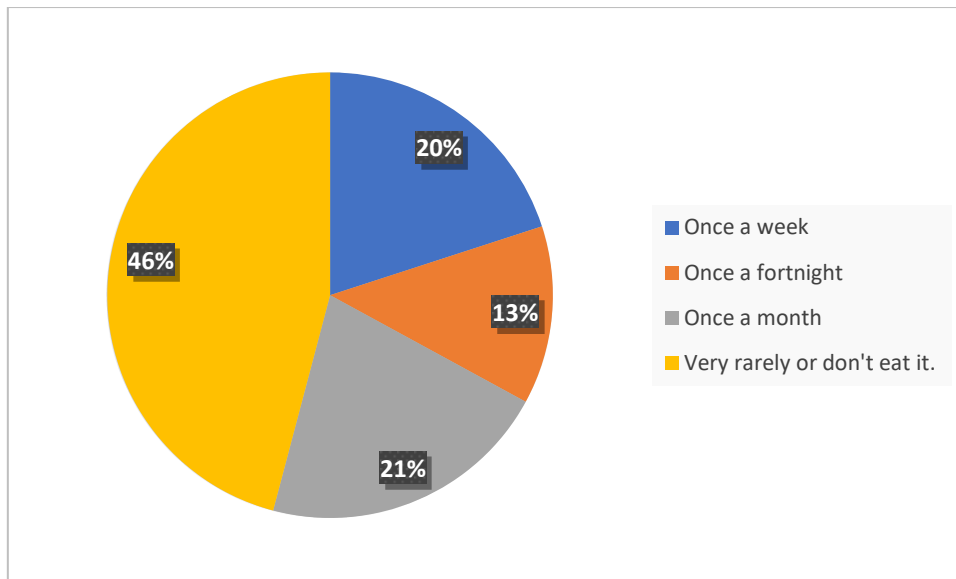


Figure 1: Response to the frequency people eat venison?"

Figure 1 shows that the largest group 46% eat venison very rarely or not at all. Because nearly half of the respondents hardly eat venison, it makes it more important to find out the reasons why. The main explanations given were that it was **too expensive** and there was a **lack of availability**. Typical reasons given were: *'It's really hard to buy it! I absolutely love it and would buy it weekly if I could get a supply!'* People said that they didn't know where to get hold of it and included comments like: *'We do not have the opportunity to purchase local venison'* and *'It's very expensive, nowhere local to get it here.'* The other reasons given were vegetarian/vegan or living with a partner who was. Two people said they were fed a lot of venison as children and it has put them off eating it for the rest of their life and one person felt *was 'too gamey.'*

Lack of availability is obviously not a problem for the other groups of people with 20% eating venison weekly and 21% eating venison once a month. The disparity of availability will be explored further.

Question 2: What is your main consideration when choosing venison?

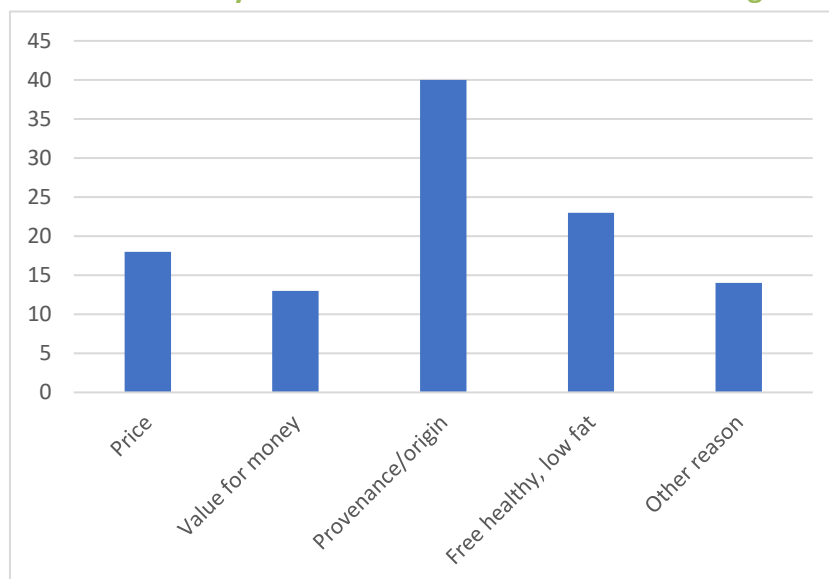


Figure 2: Response to considerations when choosing venison.

The most common consideration when choosing meat was knowing its provenance and origin. People trust and prefer local venison and really like to know where it has come from. Quality was also an important factor and that it is healthy and low in fat.

Additional considerations raised were: 'availability' and that it was 'ethical.' One person said they 'ate venison for conservation.' A portion of respondents found the question not relevant to them as they shoot their own deer. One person stated:

'I'd normally not buy it as I can often get it through bartering or as free gift locally, BUT, if and when I do buy it, I'd consider free-range-ness, provenance/origin, and then price. In pondering it ahead of other meats, I'd also consider that it's generally more of healthy low fat and LOW-CARBON meat (not fed on soy-based feed brought in from other continents, in particular) compared to some alternatives.'

It is interesting that ethical, low-carbon meat is now a consideration and the shift in consumer awareness towards environmental issues as opposed to price.

Question 3: Where do you get your venison?

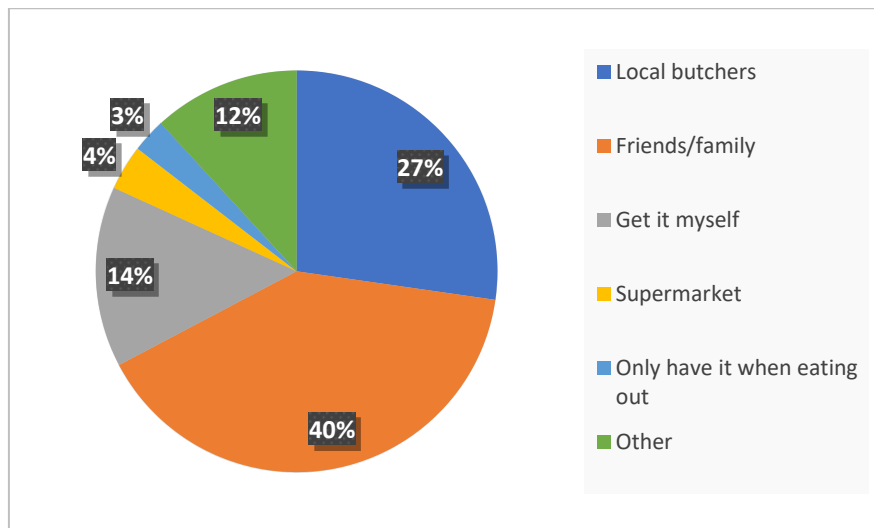


Figure 3: Response to source of venison.

The responses indicate that 54% of those that consume venison locally do not buy it. The majority appear to be self-sufficient at bringing home their own meat through stalking or knowing the right people who will do it for them. The second largest group is those that use local butchers with a minority buying supermarket venison or only eating it when out for a meal. More details about other sources (which was 14% of participants) include: wholesale suppliers, local estates and three people who mentioned Lochinver Pie Shop. One person gets it as a gift.

It seems that the majority of venison consumed is not purchased. This explains the disparity of availability in question one. While nearly half the participants have access to free venison the other half struggle to get it locally. From conversations with the local butcher it becomes clear it is made more available during the tourist season.

Question 4: How important is it that venison is produced and sold locally?

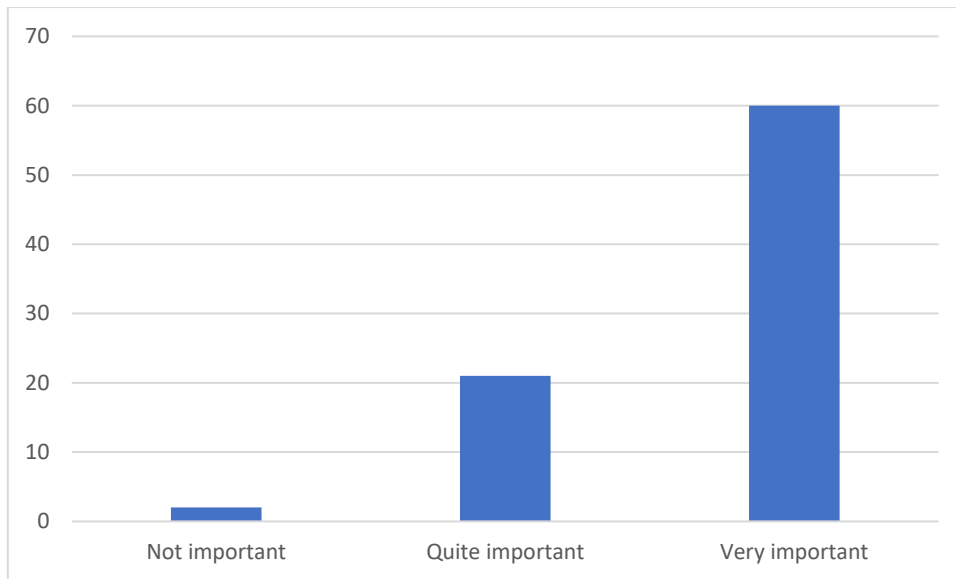


Figure 4: Response to importance of local venison production and retail availability

The results of this question echo those in question 2 about preferences when purchasing. Increased consumer awareness about provenance is now a major deciding factor. 85% of respondents support the local venison industry.

Question 5: How confident are you about cooking venison?

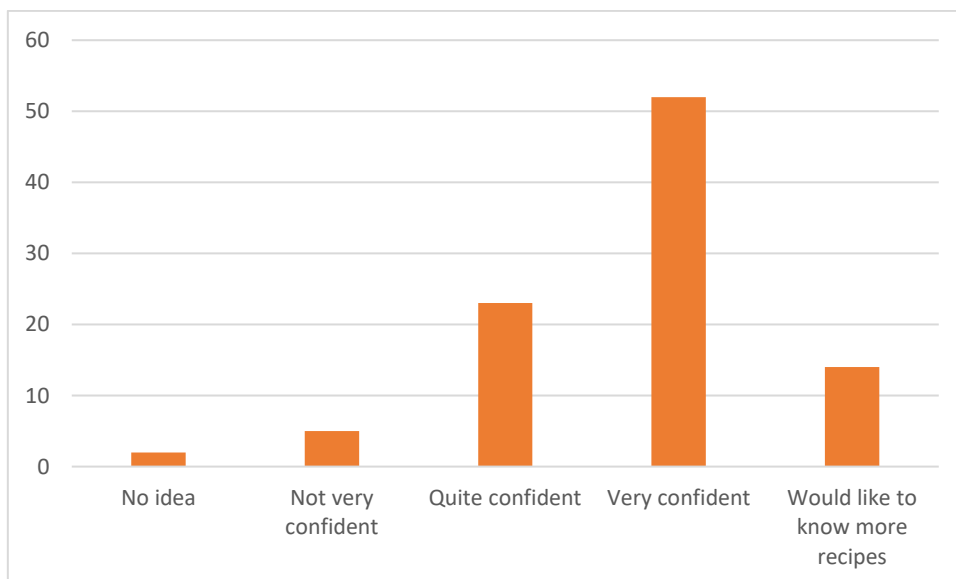


Figure 5: Response on confidence of respondents to cook venison

There is a strong majority with 54% of people who feel very confident about cooking venison with 24% responding that they are quite confident and 15% would like to know more recipes. Cooking venison does not seem to be a barrier for most people when choosing which meat to buy.

Question 6: Do you have a favourite recipe that you would like to share?

When asked whether participants would like to share a favourite recipe 73% responded no and 23% were willing. As part of this survey, a recipe booklet is being compiled with favourite recipes to make more dishes available. These booklets will be available locally.

Question 7: What cut of venison do you normally prefer?

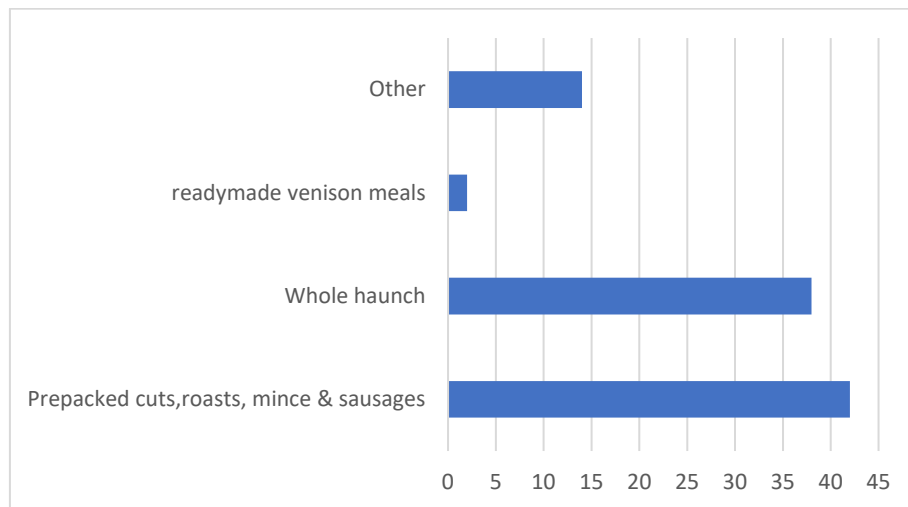


Figure 6: Response on preference of cut of venison.

40% of respondents are very confident handling a haunch of meat and cutting it up themselves. A further 44% would rather have it prepared into cuts ready to eat. This is probably unique to areas where deer are plentiful and stalking common. Three people commented that they use the whole carcass to have access to all the cuts which they butcher themselves. A lot of people commented on their preferred cut which we will come on to in the next question.

Question 8: Would you like to see more variety of local venison available for purchase?

An overwhelming majority or 87% of respondents would like to see more variety of local venison available. Lack of availability is a major issue for those that do not have access to stalking or venison from friends/neighbours. There is a demand for special initiatives locally when venison is made available outside the main tourist season. This could be trialled once a month initially and if well-advertised could gather momentum. More details of the preferred cut of the product were given by some of those who answered the second part of question 8 which asked: **which type of cut or product?** More general comments received from this question listed below:

- *Personally, I'd not buy much anyway, but would be very in favour of it being available for others to buy. whatever there's a market for*
- *More sika & roe available*
- *More variety*
- *It is a shame it is sent away*
- *All of it, I don't know who to buy it from here.*
- *If killed here, should be sold here*
- *Haven't had a bit since my mum stopped working at XXX*
- *We'd use the whole carcass*
- *We get a whole beast at a time so have access to all cuts*
- *All of it, I don't know who to buy it from here*
- *Whole beast and butcher ourselves*

- *I love it all! Packaged small cuts.*
- *Not at over-inflated prices*
- *The fresh liver is fantastic*

These comments are quite varied and give a useful indication of the issues for people when buying local venison. Preferred cuts and products are listed below. There is a strong feeling that local venison should be sold locally. It is clear that those who live in areas where deer are frequently seen and where stalking is obviously taking place, the idea of buying venison from elsewhere seems counter-intuitive.

Question 9: Which type of cut do you prefer?

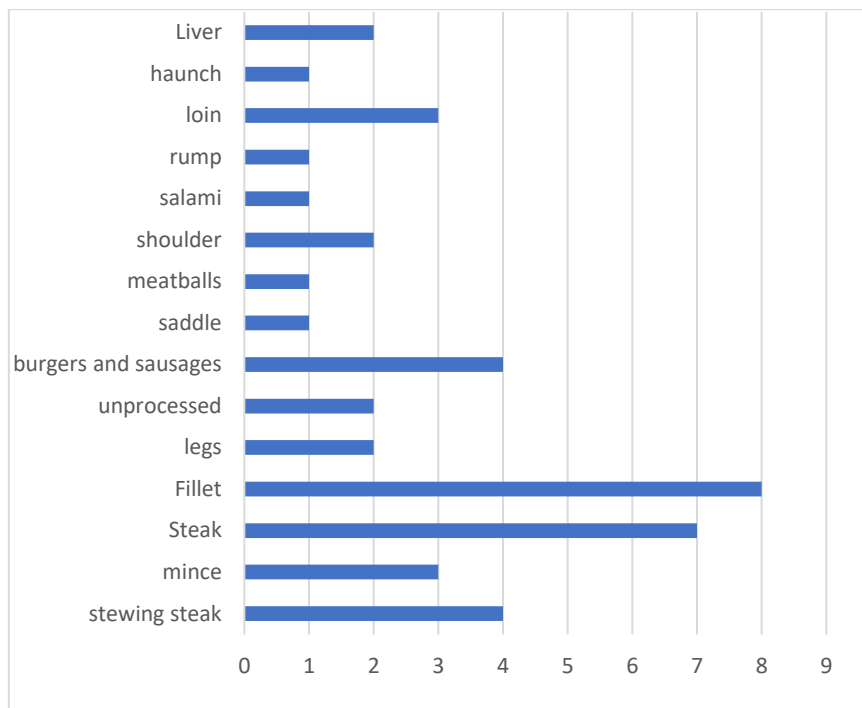


Figure 8: Response to preference of type of cut of venison.

Figure 8 shows quite a variety of different preferences. Fillet and steak were the favourites although this was qualified by “not if expensive.” Burgers and sausages were popular for families. Stewing steak was preferred because of its versatility. Diced meat was the favourite for stir-fries and roasts. The variety is quite wide-ranging, and people seem willing to try all different joints and parts and to get creative with their meat. This variety is rarely available for purchase.

Question 10: Would you like to receive the result of this survey and more information and events?

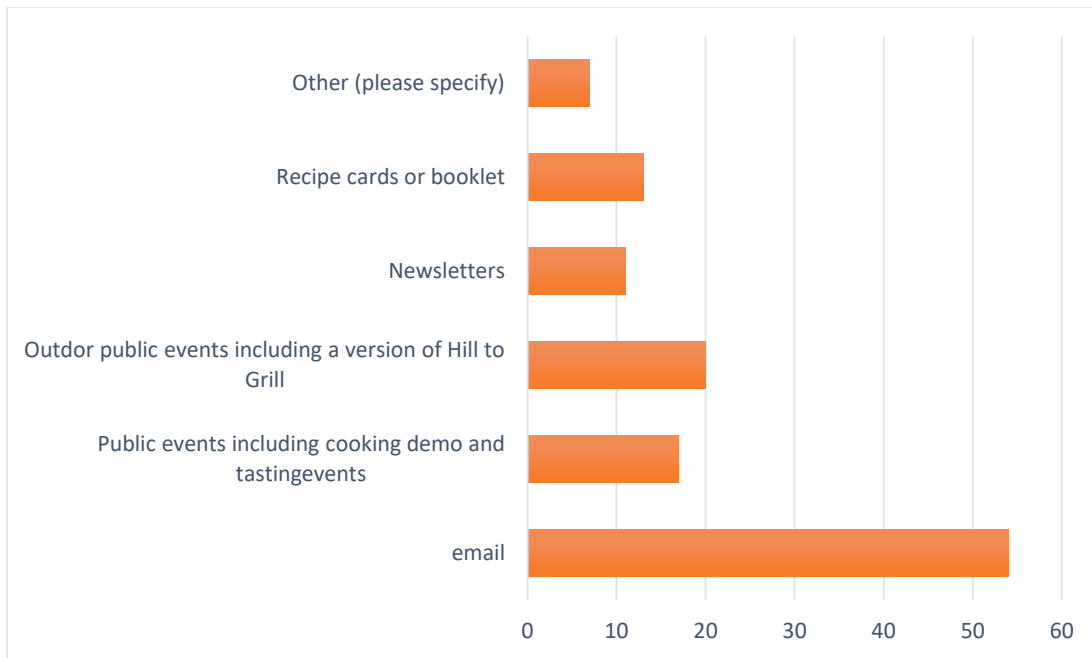


Figure 9: Response to receiving survey results and more information.

This chart shows there is an interest in public events such as learning about stalking and land management issues. There is also a desire for cooking events involving venison. Other comments include an open day for venison in tourist season.

Summary

Venison is considered one of the healthiest and most ethical and sustainable types of meat available. Red deer are widespread locally. By choosing local wild venison above other types of meat we can all help to reduce our carbon footprint by reducing food miles. Venison is surprisingly difficult to buy and is often at prices that are not affordable. Availability is problematic out of tourist season. Through this survey and the feedback received it is clear that there is a demand for affordable, local venison. A focussed day for venison sales once a month or a similar initiative might perhaps be worth trialling. A greater variety of cuts is also something that people would like to see more of.

Recommendations gathered from the results of this survey

- Offer special venison days when it can be purchased by locals out of season
Action: report to be circulated to local butchers
- Offer greater variety of cuts if possible. People seem to like having a choice that is unprocessed. Fillets and steaks were the favourites but are rarely available for purchase. **Action:** as above
- Produce venison recipe booklet **Action:** CALLP Sustainable Deer Management Project to work up a booklet or recipe cards
- Encourage the use of local butchers rather than supermarket **Action:** report to be circulated locally

- Organise events similar to the 'hill to grill'* [Romany to lead on this through JMT work.](#)

** Hill to Grill: Is a program led by CALLP with the help of partners and involves Ullapool High School pupils. The young people spend two days on the hill with professional deer stalkers to learn about wild venison, including conservation and ecological aspects of deer management. A final day in the school is spent developing a venison product, including creating a recipe, cooking it, developing packaging and marketing, based on information learnt. This project also explores food miles, sustainability, and animal welfare in the food industry.*

Further notes outside survey remit

Key issues

- **Is there enough information about the benefits of choosing venison above other types of meat?**

Consumers' choice has changed over the years as awareness grows. People now consider low-carbon alternatives, ethical choices, food that has low food miles, is sustainable, and has health benefits that are low in fat. However by making comparisons with intensively farmed alternatives consumers would become even more aware of the benefits of venison.

- **Why do supermarkets sell venison that comes from New Zealand and Spain?**

This is due partly because it is farmed to standards that provide consistent quality. Scottish venison is also consistently high in quality but to compete on an international level perhaps a more rigorous approach when selecting deer on the hill and dealing with it before it reaches the processor is needed.

- **What is preventing venison from being more affordable to buy?**

Given the amount of venison that comes from the hill annually it seems ridiculous that these are even problems! There is a gap between the price of carcasses which game dealers are paying (which currently stands at £1 per kilo) and the price of venison on the counter. During the pandemic, prices have plummeted due to a lack of demand from hotels and restaurants. The price that stalkers are getting for their carcasses does not currently cover the costs of stalking (equipment, time, fuel, etc). This is causing a nationwide problem during the pandemic as venison cannot be moved through the system bringing the industry almost to a halt. A report on the impact of reduced prices of venison and subsequently reduced stalking was documented by Tom Wall (Guardian Jan 2021¹)

To process more venison locally compliance with wild game regulations, hygiene requirements, and a vet inspection is needed, which increases the running costs considerably. As local production is highly unlikely to be able to take advantage of economies of scale this immediately increases the price passed onto the consumer. Small scale (less than 200 carcasses processed per annum) local venison processing initiatives would struggle to break even and are therefore being prevented from setting up. This could be encouraged if the government subsidised costs for setting up this kind of business.

There does seem to be a way of selling small quantities of processed meat locally without the costly vet inspection. Apparently if an individual has trained hunter status, they can

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/10/wild-deer-set-to-wreak-havoc-in-uk-woodlands-as-venison-demand-plunges?>

charge for direct supply of small quantities of processed game. To enable the hunter to do this they must be registered as a food business with their local authority and adhere to the relevant requirements of Regulation (EC) 852/2004.² If the hunter begins selling their wild game meat to those who are not the final consumer or to local retail establishments who then supply to the final consumer, or if they began processing wild game hunted by others (i.e. not members of their hunting party), they would need to seek approval as an Approved Game Handling Establishment (AGHE) from Food Standards Scotland. This is important from a local perspective as it enables a meat to be processed and sold in small amounts at reduced costs to those that an AGHE would need. This kind of operation might satisfy local demand out of the main tourist season.

- **Can we fill any gaps in knowledge about cooking venison by providing attractive recipes?**

There is already a good knowledge base when it comes to cooking venison. It is hoped this will be further increased by awareness raising initiatives such as a collection of recipes from this survey which will be made readily available for free in local outlets.

- **Is there any way of encouraging local shops to buy local venison at good prices over imports?**

This is a problem that is outwith this survey remit but increasing awareness of supermarket origins will help consumers' choices. Often venison is packaged and marketed cleverly using 'Highland' branding even though it may come from New Zealand. Consumers have to read the small print to find out the true origin. Local butchers more reliably sell local venison, but it may come from a different area of the Highlands. By highlighting the demand locally perhaps shops within the area could be encouraged to sell locally produced meat. Other possible ideas like the promotion of local food cooperatives or online schemes such as <https://deerbox.co.uk/> would be worth considering.

- **How can we increase the availability of local venison?**

To increase the availability of venison and keep prices down, local initiatives would ideally be set up to process the meat from the area for local consumption in the butchers. This would provide economic benefit and employment locally. Carcasses have to be sent away to the game dealer and the meat that comes back for sale is not necessarily originally from this area. A local enterprise like this needs a certain amount of financial incentive and expertise in meat processing. Financial margins are small with numbers of carcasses available. As we are all learning at the present time, society has to look beyond what is economically viable and look to improve the sustainability of supply chains by increasingly utilising local food sources. If the prohibitive factor to creating a local sustainable food supply is financial then introducing subsidies might prove beneficial. With the aim of net zero by 2045 it is these kinds of initiatives that will combine to reach the target. The survey responses highlighted that most people would prefer local venison that lived a free life, fed without the need for additional feed stuffs and travelled less than the journey to the supermarket rather than a piece of meat that lived its life thousands of miles away, fed with animal feed that was grown even further away, then shipped around the world in order to find its way onto your plate.

² https://www.foodstandards.gov.scot/downloads/The_Wild_Game_Guide_1.pdf