

Letter to police forces – June 2021

Gamekeeper abuse and the perceived endorsement of the ‘Moorland Monitors’

Gamekeepers in the countryside legitimately going about their business can provide an important set of additional eyes and ears for local policing helping ever more stretched rural policing teams. This is particularly true of moorland keepers operating in the most remote rural locations. There are excellent examples of the shooting community working in partnership with their local police across the country. As representative organisations, we are keen to ensure upland gamekeepers build positive relationships with their local police forces and feel confident to report any crimes.

In recent years, however, these rural workers have been painted in some quarters as villains and the ones that should be watched.

We are writing to raise our concerns with regard to the actions of predominantly anonymous people who claim to be acting on behalf of the police or working for the police as self-appointed ‘Moorland Monitors.’ They operate by spying on keepers and spreading malintent and incitement on social media.

We are concerned that the anonymity and perceived endorsement by the police is emboldening these individuals to cross the line and commit crimes such as damaging traps and infrastructure and abusing gamekeepers on social media both collectively and specifically. Some actions appear designed to implicate gamekeepers in alleged criminal activity.

Sadly, there is clear evidence that gamekeeper abuse is increasing, two recent studies undertaken in Scotland and across the UK clearly identified a rise in abuse towards gamekeepers.

Scottish government report

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-report-socioeconomic-biodiversity-impacts-driven-grouse-moors-employment-rights-gamekeepers/>

Gamekeeper survey

<file:///C:/Users/garethd/Downloads/Gamekeeper-Survey-2020-For-Press.-with-CA-GFA-and-NGO-logos.pdf>

The latter study highlighted.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of gamekeepers have experienced abuse and/or threats because of their occupation.
- Abuse via social media channels is a rising issue for gamekeepers, with 56% of respondents recording an increase in the number of incidents over the last 12 months compared to previous years.

- Respondents who have been targeted also recorded increases in physical (32%) and verbal (37%) abuse.
- Some gamekeepers also reported that the pressure of being targeted for doing their job has led directly to the breakdown of personal relationships.

Commenting on the report findings, the Environment Secretary, George Eustice, said:

“Gamekeepers do vital work as custodians of the land. They play an important role in the shooting industry, which delivers significant benefits to rural economies. Any form of abuse or intimidation is wholly unacceptable, and those responsible should feel the full force of the law. We will take the findings of this report on board.”

Gamekeepers are feeling persecuted and harassed which is causing great distress. Being a target of this bullying is a precursor to a new form of hate crime and needs to be stamped out. We are concerned that the perception is that the police are encouraging the Monitors in their ‘crime hunting’ and thereby are fueling bullying tactics and developing an institutional bias against gamekeepers.

If true, I am sure you agree, it would be a failure of a police officer abiding by the Code of Ethics not to be aware of the influence that unconscious biases such as stereotype or group thinking can have on his or her actions and decisions when carrying out duties and responsibilities. The gamekeeping and land management sector of the public in your area is losing trust and confidence in the policing profession because of its perceived close links with Monitors.

We ask that you consider this perception and the changing needs of this unique community in your rural policing area and do what is necessary and proportionate to address them. The well-being of good people is being badly affected by this targeting and the tension created. It is also increasing the amount of rural crime putting additional strain on the Forces.

We call on [North Yorkshire] Police to:

1. Make it clear, in all relevant communications both publicly and privately, that the Moorland Monitors do not work for, or act for, or on behalf of the police in any way.
2. Remind the Moorland Monitors that their social media must comply with Malicious Communications Act 1988 and that individual or collective abuse is unacceptable.
3. To remind the Moorland Monitors and the public that if they interfere with any infrastructure, even if they believe it is illegal, they are committing a crime and will be dealt with accordingly.
4. To set out to the gamekeeping community what the Police are doing to de-escalate the tensions and rebuild trust.

Our members very much want to work with your Rural Task Force officers for better rural outcomes and hope we can emulate the good work that we see in other police force areas where the land managers are the trusted extra eyes and ears for all issues from poaching to vehicle and stock theft, from fly tipping to arson.

Yours sincerely,

John Clarke, National Gamekeepers' Organisation
Amanda Anderson, Moorland Association