

MINUTES

of the MID TERM MEETING of the NORTH ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP held on SUNDAY 15th OCTOBER 2017 at 10am at THE MACPHAIL CENTRE, ULLAPOOL

Present:	Mr P Creasey Mr C Cook	Strathvaich (Chairman) Bell Ingram (Secretary)
	Mr I Macneill Mr A MacDiarmid Mr A Mackenzie Mr J Hall Mr W Lamont Mr J Mason Mr H Van Beuningen Mr A McGillivray Mrs J Whitteridge Mr I Duncan Mrs C Duncan Mr T Brigg Mr D Bulmer Mrs R Bulmer Mr H Bulmer Mr W Findlay Mrs J Scobie (pt) Mr J Legrand Ms I Scobie Mr H O'Donnell	Alladale Braemore Corriemulzie/Loubcroy Croick FES Glencalvie Inverlael Deer Forest Inverlael Deer Forest Inverlael Estate Kildermorie Kildermorie Kildermorie Ledmore Ledmore Ledmore Loch Droma W Rhidorroch E Rhidorroch E Rhidorroch Wyvis & Clach Liath
In Attendance:	Mr S Coghill Ms N Abah Mr A Harington	SNH SNH ERDMG
Apologies:	Mr C Kaier Thomsen Mr S Colvin Mr A Sutherland Mr D MacAskill Mr N Forman Hardy Mr J Whitteridge Mr P Dacre Mr D Campbell Mr M Mackenzie Mrs H Hamilton Mr A Gospel Mr B Dumughn Mr N Fraser	Braemore Corriemulzie Croick FES Glencalvie Inverlael Estate Langwell Langwell Ledmore Loch Droma Loubcroy Morefield Novar

1. WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed the Group to the Annual General Meeting and thanked them for their attendance.

The Chairman reminded Members that the "voluntary" deer sector is under tremendous pressure following the Report on Deer Management submitted by SNH to the Cabinet Secretary, who now has Simon Pepper to advise her on the "next steps". The report is a disappointing document, seemingly with its conclusions sketched out in advance on a predetermined view that "there are too many deer". A large part of its arguments hinge on pessimistic interpretations of SNH's own habitat impact assessments on SACs in 2015.

There is a real danger that the political appetite within Holyrood for all the issues around "Land Reform" might lead to Government directing land owners and managers to implement inappropriate reductions in deer numbers and so harm the uplands. There may be some who would welcome (possibly including the misleadingly named Forestry Policy Group which Simon Pepper chairs) the conversion of our upland grass and peatlands to scrub woodland but that seems inappropriate.

ADMG's chairman Richard Cooke is leading the voluntary sector's campaign to make sure that policy makers - not least cabinet secretary Roseanna Cunningham - are aware that upland management is not just a process of repeating false reports that "deer numbers are too high" and that "the more they are cut the better for our environment".

The people in the best place to decide on habitat condition and the appropriate "stocking" are the estate stalkers, and when sufficiently knowledgeable, the proprietors and factors as they have first-hand knowledge of what is going on. Our job as individual members of the ADMG is to try to ensure that stalkers, and the voluntary sector as a whole, are left to get on with this management without damaging imposed intervention from government agencies.

The Chairman contributed to the Deer Review process by an examination of the basis behind SNH's interpretation of its habitat impact assessments - using the Beinn Dearg reports as a "test case" - and is now challenging what he sees as a lazy assumption by SNH's upland adviser's team that habitats are best preserved by minimising grazing impacts rather than setting them at levels (in some local cases even at "medium" rather than "medium low" and not just "low") that can be shown to be best for habitat diversity.

The Chairman was summoned to Holyrood last December to give evidence to the RACCE committee (coincidentally at the same time as Simon Pepper) and said that with some difficulty he left a marker on the minutes showing that SNH had misinterpreted its habitat assessments and warning of the dangers, and costs, of prescribing the damaging medicine of a step change reduction in deer numbers on the grounds of a poor diagnosis.

This is on-going work at this but he is hopeful of a break through soon - partly due to help from Christopher Kiaer Thomsen at Braemore who has supplied a professional 2017 resurvey of an eighth of SNH's 2015 assessment sites.

The Chairman said he hopes this will lead to the 2015 Beinn Dearg report being withdrawn and open the way to a new challenge to the national deer management report. He is also challenging the scientific basis for SNH's habitat impact targets for Beinn Dearg going forward (which has implications for all other SAC's) which may see him arguing not just with SNH's uplands adviser but also directly with the board.

In the interim the Chairman said he wants to make sure the group is protected against being targeted by SNH for "special action" by demonstrating they have a grip on habitat management by agreeing the resolutions set out in the Agenda for this meeting.

Because Mrs Scobie was unable to stay for the whole meeting she was given the chance to share her thoughts on certain points. She spoke to a paper she had prepared and which the group agreed could be circulated with the minutes so other members could see it. She then left the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES

The apologies were as listed above.

3. MINUTES OF MEETING ON 30th JUNE 2017

After a short discussion Members considered and approved the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting on the 30th June. Proposer, Mr van Beuningen, Seconder, Mr Duncan.

4. MATTERS ARISING

The Secretary confirmed he had completed all his actions from the last meeting. Glencalvie had kindly ensured the cull and count records held by the Secretary were complete. The Secretary agreed to go through his records and ask individual estates for any information he was missing.

5. PEATLAND RESTORATION – NDURIE ABAH

The Chairman welcomed Ndurie Abah from the SNH Peatland Action team.

In August Ndurie had supplied to all Members, whose land included peatland, a summary of the peatland and its condition by means of a peatland (including habitat) and carbon map of their property and identifying those parts which are to varying degrees degraded and could be suitable for restoration work. The purpose being to stimulate a discussion between the individual Members and her team about what restoration work might be done.

The email from the Secretary forwarding the estate summaries included within it a number of website links to further reading, types of restoration and grant schemes applicable to peatland restoration projects,

Ndurie then gave a presentation to the Group on the process of peatland restoration and the significance of protecting and repairing the peatland within the NRDMG area. In this respect, she explained that peatland stores significant quantities of carbon and is a very effective and long terms method of doing so. Degraded peatland, she explained, releases carbon back into the environment together with other greenhouse gases such as methane. Two principle types of restoration work she discussed with the Group were ditch blocking and reprofiling of bare peat or degraded peat hags. The first is more straightforward and has the potential to benefit quite large areas of land comparatively inexpensively. The second could achieve good results but was expensive and comparatively complex to do. The Chairman explained he had carried out some reprofiling work at Strathvaich and more work would be underway throughout the Autumn and made an open invitation to members to come and see the work underway and the results of the work from earlier years.

Ndurie explained that the NRDMG, under the general heading of ‘Delivering Public Interest’, is charged to demonstrably carry out actions ‘to improve Scotland’s ability to store carbon by maintaining or improving ecosystem health’. The Group is to:

- Quantify the extent of the carbon-sensitive habitats within the DMG range
- Identify opportunities for the creation/restoration of peatlands and encourage uptake of peatland restoration projects for which public funding is available
- Contribute as appropriate to River Basin Management Planning

Ndurie pointed out the link between the peatland and SAC’s, SSSI’s SPA’s etc. This is directly relevant if a member’s property includes land within a S.7 Control Area but is also indirectly relevant if the peatland is the headwaters for rivers, which are also an SAC. The significance of this last point is twofold; the first is that an AECS application (SRDP funding) will be more likely to succeed if you can demonstrate through the restoration works you will benefit an SAC and the second is that restoration work that will benefit the head waters of a river system, which from the Groups perspective is an integral part of the River Basin Management which the different District Salmon Fishery Boards are involved with.

Any Members considering peatland restoration can get in touch with Ndurie Abah of SNH for an initial discussion or to ask any questions, by contacting PeatlandAction@snh.gov.uk or at her office as follows:

Peatland ACTION Project Officer – Highland
Scottish Natural Heritage - Kinlochewe
Address: Anancaun | Kinlochewe | by Achnasheen | IV22 2PA
Phone: 01445 760 254 | 07799 016 834
Email: ndurie.abah@snh.gov.uk

Grant applications will be possible next year but Members should contact Ndurie to check when the grant window open.

6. HABITAT MONITORING 2017

The Secretary reminded Members that at the last AGM the group had agreed, with the assistance of ECAF funding, to commission a Group wide Habitat Condition survey. SNH however failed to make ECAF available in 2017 and now do not believe it will ever be available again.

Some Members have been conducting their own habitat monitoring work, either for their own purposes or monitoring those sites generated by SNH on Dwarf Shrub Heath and Blanket Bog for Group level monitoring. Some Members delayed the commencement of survey work in the belief that the Group wide survey would be completed in 2017. The Section 7 areas are surveyed regularly by SNH. Overall however the response from Members has been low.

The Secretary detailed the simple need for the Group to get the survey work done not only to assist with deer population modelling going forward but also that it was something which SNH would expect to see done when the Group review takes place at the end of 2018.

Members discussed the matter with some frustration being voiced about the level of participation. Three estates mentioned that they had been using Highland Birchwood to do their monitoring and suggested they be asked to quote to do the work, in order to provide some continuity.

Members resolved that the Secretary should get a price from Highland Birchwood for carrying out the work in 2018 and agreed to adjust the budget to include a provisional sum of £10,000 to cover the work.

7. TARGET POPULATION AND CULLS FOR 2017/8

The Secretary spoke in reference to the population models supplied with the meeting papers. He explained that at a Group level if the hind culls continued at the level seen on the open range up to the 2016/7 season then it was highly likely the hind population and the deer population as whole on the open range would, by 2020, be larger than was recorded in the 2015 Helicopter count.

With the aim on mind to reverse the growth trend the Group was asked to approve the resolutions as set out on the Agenda:

- Approve that, as a minimum, annual culls should be equal to recruitment to the herd on the open range after allowing for mortality by other means and emigration/loss to woodland
- Approve that it is politic/appropriate, and in the absence of Habitat Monitoring data, to leave the Stag cull at the 2016 level and increase the open range Hind cull by 200 animals over the 2016/7 level each year for the next three years.
- Approve that a Helicopter Count be conducted in 2020.

After a full discussion Members agreed the resolutions but with the following additional comments:

Members discussed that if a Group level Habitat Condition survey had been agreed, it was possible that the results of the survey might necessitate a change in the number of hinds culled in 2018/9 and beyond and so decided that the resolution would be subject to the ability to make adjustments as advised by the 2018 habitat survey.

Mrs Bulmer made the point that this, although a start, was not good enough, and what is really needed is a regular discussion between Members perhaps within each of our three "sub-groups" to discuss deer numbers, past culls and changes in numbers, and to discuss, agree and then monitor annual cull targets.

Sinclair Coghill added that he had supplied to the Secretary, albeit too late to be added to the meeting papers, information that could assist the sub groups if this approach was adopted. The Secretary said he would circulate Sinclair's information to the group.

Members decided that given the high cost of a helicopter count it would be sensible to begin to accumulate funds from 2017/18 at the rate of £10,000 per year so that they might be in a position to contribute up to half the cost of operating a helicopter count. This figure was agreed on the expectation that SNH would still require to conduct a count of the S.7 areas and so would contribute the balance.

Members asked the Secretary to issue a list to show how the additional cull would be distributed amongst the group.

8. **DEER COUNT 2018**

As in 2017 a foot count should take place any time from 1st January and that rather than set a date it will be the responsibility of the count coordinators to be in regular contact with one another to ensure the best conditions are used. The Secretary will assist coordinators if they are struggling to make contact with the Members in their areas.

The three sub Group count coordinators that Members will liaise with are:

West: Ali Mackenzie

Central: Alan McGillivray

East: Andrew Sutherland

All their contact details are on the contact sheet

9. FINANCIAL STATEMENT YEAR TO 30th SEPTEMBER 2017

The Secretary presented the statement and updated the Group that all outstanding subscriptions had now been paid.

10. ECAF

Adequately covered under Habitat Monitoring

11. BUDGET FOR THE YEAR TO 30th SEPTEMBER 2018

The Secretary presented the budget for the year ahead as supplied and undertook to re-issue a copy with the minutes of the meeting updated to include a provisional sum of £10,000 for the open range Habitat Monitoring work and £10,000 to begin a fund towards a helicopter count in 2020.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Mr Coghill said that the second SNH formal review of the deer management plan would take place towards the end of next year. He added that SNH had been criticised by Ministers for not using its powers sufficiently and had been charged to use them and where appropriate initiate new control agreements. Last time the Group met, he said, the idea of an expansion of the S.7 area had been discussed and he said he would like the Group to agree to meet again, ideally before the normal mid term meeting date in 2018 to discuss this in more detail.

Mr Hall led a short discussion, touching on the level of take up by Members of Habitat Monitoring and the newly agreed hind cull target, to encourage peer pressure and make sure everyone was playing their part. In this respect he said it was important for the Secretary to make certain the Group knew when someone wasn't pulling their weight.

13. APPOINTMENT OF OFFICE BEARERS

Mr Patrick Creasey to remain Chairman. Bell Ingram to remain Secretary.

14. NEXT MEETING

The Secretary will liaise with the Chairman and SNH over the possibility of a Spring meeting to discuss the SNH S.7 proposal and circulate Members to secure a suitable venue, date and time.

The mid-term meeting will be held at the Oykel Bridge Hotel. The Secretary will circulate Members to secure a suitable date and time.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 1 pm.

ACTION PLAN

Adjust and re-issue the 2017/8 Budget	CRWC
Issue ADMG/NRDMG 2017/8 subscriptions	CRWC
2018 Foot Count	ALL
Appoint contract to carry out a Habitat Condition survey in 2018	CRWC
Complete Estate Statements (Braemore, Inverlael Deer Forest, Loubcroy)	CRWC/Members
Liaise with SNH over a spring meeting to discuss SNH S.7 proposals	CRWC/PC/SNH
Organise venue for the mid-term meeting	CRWC

Bell Ingram
Chartered Surveyors
Estate Office
Bonar Bridge
IV24 3EA

CRWC/NRDMG/2
November 2017