

North Ross Deer Management Group Spring Meeting
Held at Croick Estate on Tuesday 26th March 2024 at 10.30am

In attendance:

James Hall (Chair) - Croick	JH
David Campbell – Director NRDMG	DC
Helen Watson – Secretary NRDMG	HS
Colin Morrison – ADL	CM
Sam Tedcastle – Centre for Good Relations	ST
Hugh O’Donnell - Wyvis	HD
Sinclair Coghill – Wyvis	SC
Ian Duncan – Kildermorie	ID
Carol Duncan – Kildermorie	CD
Sam Thompson – Kildermorie	STh
Sam Whitting – Kildermorie	SW
Derek Macaskill – Forestry Land Scotland	DM
Megan Rowland – NatureScot	MR
Ali Mackenzie – Corriemulzie	AM
Ian Collier – Clath Liath	IC
Wayne Grant – Braemore & Droma	WG
Andrew Sutherland – Glencalvie	AS
Alistair Harington – Glencalvie	AH
David Gladwin – Inverlael Estate	DG
Rob Cooper – Langwell	RC
Charles Harrison – Rhidorroch	CH
Jamie Bain – Ledmore	JB
Donald Macrae – Strathvaich	DM

Apologies

Tom Hodgkiss – Leckmelm
 Jake Buckthorp – Inverlael Forest
 Simon Scott – Loubcroy
 Innes Macneil – Alladale
 Nicholas Forman Hardy – Glencalvie
 Julien Legrand – East Rhidorroch
 Robin Irvine - Morefield

Item No.	Comments	Action
1.	<p>Welcome & Apologies JH welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for coming.</p> <p>JH took the opportunity to thank everyone for the huge effort in increased culling following the helicopter count in November, thus enabling the Group</p>	

2.	<p>to deliver well within the parameters of the Section 7 agreement which was a significant achievement.</p> <p>JH also wanted to mention that there is a change in today's Agenda as Brodie Wilson who is Policy Head for the Scottish Government had verbally agreed to come along to today's meeting when we met her at the ADMG AGM, however we have had no response to emails or phonecalls since that meeting. We will use that agenda item to discuss the consultation and remind everyone that the consultation ends on 29th March, and we urge everyone to respond to the consultation.</p> <p>Apologies as above were read out by HW.</p>	
3. 4.	<p>Minutes of the Previous Meeting</p> <p>There were no matters arising from the previous meeting minutes and the content was deemed to be accurate.</p>	
5.	<p>Sub-Group Reports including 2023/23 Culls & Census</p> <p>East Sub-Group Report – ID</p> <p>The East Sub-Group helicopter count was only 120 up on the 2019 count and we remained within the 10 deer per sq/km but due to the weather on the day we ended up with a count that made the East subgroup look better than it is and the area where the gap occurred was in the march with Glencalvie. The deer that would normally be on the Kildermorie side of the march were on the Glencalvie side of the march. So, working with Glencalvie, we upped our hind cull, particularly along that march. Overall, we just about made our hind cull. Wyvis had a very optimistic hind target of 200 Hinds but did manage 150 which was excellent. One thing that was discussed at the East Sub-Group Meeting was sika deer. STh had said that under Scottish Government guidance we are hitting the native red deer pretty hard, but the invasive species of sika seem to be going under the radar. The emphasis has to be on sika deer in the future. If we continue to hit the native deer and ignore the sika deer, then there is going to be a big problem. The sika deer are very wise, and stags have not been whistling this year as they know they will be shot, increasingly more young stags on the open hill, it's the elephant in the room.</p> <p>JH agreed with ID that there is a need to focus much more seriously on the sika deer. Obviously, with the Section 7 we need to reduce the red deer, however we do need to up the sika deer culling next year. When we look at revising our Deer Management Plan we need to take sika into consideration.</p> <p>DM commented that that FLS are putting a lot of pressure on sika numbers and that they have a problem in forest blocks despite shooting the same number of deer, which should have reduced the numbers down but that is not the case. He would like the focus moved to sika deer. They seem to breed faster and there are twins being seem more often.</p>	

	<p>West Sub-Group Report – CH</p> <p>The West Sub-Group have not held their sub-group meeting yet, so CH doesn't have an overall report, however the count in November was extremely helpful for the West Sub-Group as it showed what was needed to be done and everyone went above and beyond to help meet the required targets. He has mentioned the Sika problem on previous occasions, and they do carry some economic value to him so he would like to keep them in check but not eradicate them.</p> <p>JB thought the hind condition were in good condition and calving seemed to be going well. He will work in collaboration with other estates in the coming season to try and continue the hard cull.</p> <p>Central Sub-Group Report – JH</p> <p>The Central Sub-Group have not held their meeting yet either but obviously in terms of the volume of deer that had to be culled fell mostly to Glencalvie, Croick, Corriemulzie and Alladale shoot high numbers anyway. That area on the march between Alladale, Glencalvie, Corriemulzie and Croick got hit hard this year and it will be probably a lot harder next year. A careful count was kept on pregnancy hinds that we shot and what was marked was the reduction in the percentage of hinds that were pregnant in those that were shot before and after Christmas. Before Christmas about 36% of the hinds were pregnant and after Christmas it was only about 22%. The shocking run of cold, wet weather must have had an effect on the hinds and there was a lot of evidence where the hinds had re-absorbed the calf to maintain their own condition. JH asked if other estates had any comparable data? It is unlikely that Croick will have more than 25% calving rate this year. JH asked if any other estates had kept a record? WH said that he had shot 80 hinds and 15 were pregnant. ID said they hadn't kept that data but had done two counts recently and a white ground count using thermal imaging showed that recruitment is around 29% so depending on the weather for the next few weeks, that's around where Kildermorie would expect to be. STh and SW said that they expected the figures to be around 25% to 30% but would send the data on. CH said pregnancy rates would also depend on the age of the hind and it would be difficult to compare when some shot high numbers of hinds against other estates with lower culls.</p> <p>AM said that they didn't keep that data but had observed the condition of the hinds in February was much poorer than earlier in the season. The recruitment count will be telling. WG said he thinks that there could be mortality within the calves as the February calves were a lot lighter than earlier born calves.</p>	
6.	<p>NatureScot Report</p> <p>MR reported that she was very pleased with the delivery of the cull after the helicopter count, as was Graeme Taylor.</p> <p>As to the Section 7, the next steps will be taken following the results of the HIA.</p>	
	<p>The survey will take place at the end of June and results should be out by the end of September.</p> <p>Following the results a decision will be taken as to the Section 7 will end or if it will be extended for a year. There is not an appetite within NatureScot to</p>	

	<p>escalate the Section 7. The group has shown that it can deliver when there is a need to.</p> <p>JH questioned the length of time it takes to get the results back from surveying at the end of June. MR commented that this is the worst-case scenario, and the results could be back quicker than this timeframe. JH asked MR to confirm that the assessors have already been contracted to carry out this work.</p> <p>A short discussion was held on the importance of HIA and the correlation between the condition of land and deer numbers, which doesn't seem to have been taken into account in the 10 deer per sq/km approach taken by the Scottish Government.</p> <p>WG stated that someone was on Braemore doing some of the survey work last week. This led to when the best time to do various aspects of surveying. DC asked MR to have a timeframe of what survey work is being carried out and when/where.</p> <p>ID commented that regardless of what sort of surveying was going on the most important thing is that the data is collected at the same time each year or whenever the data is being collected, otherwise there is no way to see improvement in conditions.</p> <p>MR stated that sika number reduction on Loch Ness Side and the Cairngorms is being looked at.</p> <p>MR also said it was important to think about the DMNRO Consultation which ends on 29th March – please respond to the consultation. Most of the questions are Yes/No.</p>	<p>MR</p> <p>MR</p>
<p>7.</p>	<p>HIA – Colin Morrison</p> <p>Cm has been involved in HIA across the group for a number of years, using the higher level of assessment that NatureScot uses which gives comparable assessment. In the past the assessments were done at Sub-Group level, however with experience, it is probably better for individual estates to have a 2-day assessment along with the sub-group assessment so that individual estate data does not skew the sub-group analysis. The carrying capacity on one estate will differ from the next. There is now a range of tools available to work out a carrying capacity which is much more nuanced, and it can be done in a relatively quick time. Anything over moderate low is going to give lower numbers than 10 deer per sq/km.</p> <p>Generally, when CM looked over the estates this last year there was a better picture overall, but CM stated that a poor winter could affect the previous assessment, and this winter hasn't been very good and if the summer doesn't come good it could affect the improvement from last year.</p> <p>This will start to make changes if the Scottish Government take a more holistic approach to deer numbers rather than an overall approach.</p> <p>JH wanted to ask MR if there were any tools being looked at by NatureScot to assess what deer numbers a landholding can accommodate due to the habitat, rather than the general number because if we start to use this approach but NatureScot is not then we are at odds.</p> <p>MR stated that she had someone write a piece about this for NatureScot and she would see where they were at with this.</p> <p>CM stated that using satellite data along with habitat assessment can give much better data and along with the carrying capacity data is much more focused to an individual estate.</p>	

	<p>JH stated most estates are doing HIA and emphasised how important building up this data is a step forward in building evidence of habitat improvements. It would be good if everyone used the same methodology so that we could consolidate the process to be able to map across the whole DMG. Whether we are in a Section 7 or not it is difficult to have an informed discussion with NatureScot about deer numbers if we don't have an informed condition of habitat.</p> <p>ID stated that it was hard to think that given the cost and environmental impact of helicopter counts that NatureScot will still be carrying out this practice so something else with replace this exercise. And given the budget surplus of approx. £13-£15,000 along with possibly support from NatureScot, to get a groupwide HIA so we have a platform to move forward, knowing we have consistent data and put the focus on HIA.</p> <p>JH stated that the group is not VAT registered and it was decided to reduce fees and each estate to pay and be able to reclaim VAT. We would be happy to orchestrate the HIA if all estates were happy to carry out the exercise but only when all estates agreed they were happy to do this.</p> <p>DC will work out a proposal and distribute to all members which will include a costing for each estate.</p> <p>CM suggested 2 days on each estate and a report at sub-group level. The sub-group level would give more accurate findings rather than group level.</p> <p>RC stated he thought all estates were already carrying out HIA. CM thought that some estates were using best practice guidance which takes 9 years to get a response. Those who have used this guidance have found out that this is nowhere near rigorous enough to get a good assessment. DC asked if any estate was not carrying out HIA – most seemed to be carrying out assessments apart from those with Sporting Tenants and it is up to owners to be responsible for their own landholding.</p> <p>STh would also like to see counting of deer in woodland group wide. If we can do dung counting and try to get numbers of deer in woodland it would also help with numbers overall. It would tie in with FLS.</p> <p>This brought up a discussion around other herbivores that share land with deer. The Scottish Government seem to be focusing on deer numbers and have set a maximum but in the same area sheep numbers must be a minimum number to be able to apply for subsidies, and this is a concern on shared grazings. JH said that we must continue to try and get as good an assessment as possible and have the data to support areas of overgrazing where there are shared herbivore areas.</p>	DC/CM
8.	<p>Deer Management Plan</p> <p>Our Deer Management Plan is due to be revised at the end of 2024. After discussion it was decided to update the plan with information from the new population models and use a minimalist approach elsewhere until the outcome is known from the Nature Restoration Orders so that the group does not commit to an action plan that could be obsolete in a few months. We will work on a plan that is adaptable as information becomes available. Each estate and sub-group's information will be reviewed.</p>	DC

	<p>CH and ID suggested a more diverse plan that included HIA and land management plans. JH agreed with the comments; however, we will not race to put something together for August and then find it is not what is wanted by the Scottish Government.</p>	
<p>9.</p>	<p>Deer Management Restoration Orders ADMG have pushed back hard against the Scottish Government's consultation Managing Deer for Climate and Nature which introduces DMNRO's and the full article has been distributed in the latest E-Scope which has been circulated by HW. The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has also issued a response which has been circulated by HW this morning. We are all urged to respond to the consultation which closes on 29th March. The DMNRO's are basically a Section 8 but without any evidence there is a problem. While the Government representatives said that this was not what was intended but this is what the Orders stated and there seems to be a view that weighted numbers are important. MR commented that part of the consultation is also the removal of the female deer season. DC will undertake a group response and send it with a covering letter to Maree Todd and Lorna Slater, but he emphasised the importance of flooding the Scottish Government with responses. Unfortunately, the consultation has been put together without anyone who is affected being involved in the process!</p>	<p>DC</p>
<p>10.</p>	<p>The Common Ground Forum ST is a mediator and wanted to help improve communications between people on the ground and those who were involved in policy making. The Common Ground Forum is a voice from the sector, and has had support from the Scottish Government, although they have not been involved in</p>	
	<p>the conversations they have been listening to what has been said. The principle is helping voices to be heard and there have been a series of events held where stalkers have been highlighting issues that have been encountered. ST is working with the group to deliver the messages from those working on the ground back to the government. ST is super impressed with the progress our group has made, where everyone is now taking the opportunity to speak, and she is here today to see if the group needs any further help in the issues we are dealing with. There is now a date for a meeting for Stalkers in parliament on 2nd May. The film that stalkers have made about the problems they encounter will be played to MSP's. This will get the rural voice into parliament rather than listening to the urban voice who are not involved in the sector. They also can take 50 people from across Scotland. The consultation is a process but there will still be time to talk about the consultation after the 29th March. Going forward the Common Ground Forum is continuing. It will be a vehicle to aid communication and help groups to manage conflict well to gain good outcomes. There will be more work building in the stalker's voice and the next meeting will include land managers to have similar discussions. Hopefully they will be able to bring in policy makers to listen to the discussions and the concerns raised.</p>	

	<p>JH has found great value in having the Common Ground Forum to help the stalkers to find their voice. Is anyone listening to what they are saying and changed their minds on anything? ST said that one change that came to mind is that the government has given some money towards the venison market. ID felt that having the Common Ground Forum has brought the group closer together as the problems encountered within the group are much smaller than the problems encountered out with the group.</p>	
11.	<p>Any Other Business There were no other items raised.</p>	
12.	<p>Date and Venue for NRDMG AGM We are looking for another estate to host the AGM on the 6th November 2024. Please email helen@hils.ltd if you are willing to host.</p>	