

**MINUTES OF MEETING OF THE WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
HELD AT ACHNASHEEN HALL, ACHNASHEEN RAILWAY STATION
THURSDAY 29th MARCH 2018**

Present:	Randal Wilson Alasdair MacDonald Stuart Allison Angus Davidson Ruari Matheson Hendrik van Beuningen Jake Buckthorp Gary Ross Norman Kelman Mark Lorimer Craig McIntosh Donald MacLeod Barbara McDonald Andrew Oliver Roddy Legge Kenny Ross Ronnie Ross George Seligman David Bennett Donald Macrae	Chairman Dundonnell Eilean Darach Fannich Fannich Foich Foich Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Inverbroom Kinlochewe Letterewe Letterewe Letterewe Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Strathbran Strathbran Strathvaich
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt Sinclair Coghill Ndurie Abah Tamara Lawson Kevin Frediani David Neilson	Secretary/Treasurer SNH SNH (Peatland Action) SNH Ullapool Inverewe Estate Inverewe Estate
Apologies:	David Lilley Edgar Seligman Mark Seligman Willie Lamont Derek McAskill	Heights of Kinlochewe Strathbran Strathbran Forest Enterprise Forest Enterprise

The Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited each attendee around the table to introduce themselves for the benefit of any newcomers. He acknowledged the good turnout and the effort made by everyone to attend, this being the first meeting since August 2017 with the proposed meeting in December having been delayed pending the spring helicopter count data being available.

The meeting then went on to discuss the following:-

Item/

Item	Notes	Action
1.0	<u>Minutes of Meeting held on 30th August 2017</u>	
	The Chairman asked if there were any comments on the Minutes of the meeting. There being none, the minutes were proposed for adoption by Barbara McDonald (BM) of Letterewe and Kenny Ross of Lochrosque (KR).	
2.0	<u>Matters Arising</u>	
2.1	<u>Survey of Existing Native Woodland</u>	
	<p>KSB raised the issue discussed at the previous meeting of seeking a sensible methodology for the survey of the existing native woodland and explained the difficulty in coming forward with such. Having referred this matter to Ben Lennon (BL), his head forester, KSB explained that whilst the DMG was principally interested in the impact of large herbivore on native woodland sites, it had to be acknowledged that this was probably a small part of the overall assessment protocol and therefore using the same methodology as the original survey may not be the best method of determining this information. BL indicated that the DMG needs to be clear about the questions it is asking before moving forward with any further survey work. For example, was it deer impact, woodland condition, presence of natural regeneration or deer numbers. In other words, what constitutes a measure of success or failure. Therefore, it was agreed to delay any further input on this until the AGM in May when it was hoped that BL could attend and run through the options and agree with the Group exactly what was required and thereafter a sensible methodology could perhaps be agreed.</p> <p>George Seligman (GS) of Strathbran mentioned the Forestry Commission woodland at Strathbran and suggested there may be an anomaly as this woodland was shot heavily by the Forestry Commission and yet it appeared to have been highlighted as a native woodland with a high impact.</p> <p>Sinclair Coghill (SC) advised that the data in the previous survey of native woodlands was collected between 2006 and 2013 and therefore some of the data could well be out of date. His view was that the Group was taking a sensible approach in considering reassessing some of the woodlands shown as having high impact in the previous survey.</p> <p>BM advised that SNH would be visiting Letterewe later in the year to assess the native woodland and queried whether SNH would be happy to share their proposed methodology with the Group. SC indicated that they would be.</p>	
2.2	<u>Scottish Deer Health Survey</u>	
	KSB advised that having been in touch with Dr Beth Wells of the Moredun Research Institute, she had indicated that so far some 972 samples had been collected/	

Item	Notes	Action
	<p>collected and had indicated that the Moredun were delighted with this. Dr Wells had indicated that ideally 1,000 samples was the minimum number that was required during the sampling year, to make sure that the data had enough power. However, Dr Wells had also indicated that there had been an agreement that the Moredun would not release any results until all the samples had been processed and analysed so that there was no chance of false prevalence data getting out before all the data had been collated. Therefore, the Group would have to wait until later in the year before hearing the results of the survey.</p> <p>RW advised the Group that the Food Standard Agency Inspectors had visited various deer larders and the informal feedback was that they had not been impressed. Therefore, he encouraged all members to join the Scottish Quality Wild Venison Scheme as it was vitally important that wild venison producers raised the standards of carcass presentation, particularly from a hygiene point of view. He mentioned that there was a very real danger to stalking estates in terms of food hygiene, and in particular Ecoli 0157, where, if things weren't tightened up, we could find ourselves in a position where wild venison had to be removed from the food chain with the resultant impact in deer forest incomes.</p> <p>Ruari Matheson (RM) suggested that out of season shooting and presentation of poor carcasses would not be helping matters.</p>	
3.0	<u>Revisions to Deer Management Plan</u>	
	<p>RW noted that the various changes proposed at the August meeting had been accepted and therefore the Group's Deer Management Plan had been revised accordingly and the revised Plan would now be loaded up the Group's website. He also suggested that if at any time people felt further revision was required, this should be raised with the Group for consideration as the Deer Management Plan should be seen as a live document, constantly under review and fit for purpose.</p>	KSB
4.0	<u>Priority Actions Arising from DMP</u>	
4.1	<u>Carbon Sensitive Habitats</u>	
	<p>RW outlined his own experience in peat wetland restoration where he was delighted with the work undertaken under the Peat Wetland Restoration Scheme administered by SNH. In particular, he mentioned the benefit of stabilising the erosion of the peatlands and of the downstream cleaner water which was of benefit not only to Scottish Water, but also the estate's hydro renewable scheme.</p> <p>Ndurie/</p>	

Item	Notes	Action
	<p>Ndurie Abah (NA) confirmed that initially £8 million had been made available to spent by 31st March 2018. She advised that there had been an underspend and that as a result, the money would be returned to the Government, the indication being that there would be £4 million available for the coming year. Applications must be in by the end of May 2018 and NA advised that the application forms are available on the SNH website together with detailed information on the scheme. She also indicated that they were hoping to get a little bit more funding as time passed, which would hopefully enable the scheme to cope with the vast majority of applications in terms of funding. She advised that she was based in SNH’s Kinlochewe office and would be happy to help any members who were interested in pursuing this.</p> <p>SC queried whether funding might be available for feasibility work and NA confirmed that it probably would and she would be happy to entertain discussions on a Group-wide basis.</p>	
4.2	<p><u>Habitat Monitoring</u></p>	
	<p>RW suggested that if all the plots could be re-surveyed this spring, that would be a good idea in terms of keeping the momentum going. He advised that a video would shortly be coming out from the Association of Deer Management Group to help/guide everyone on the most suitable “best practice” methodology. In discussing the methodology used, SC confirmed that the methodology used by both the Group and SNH is broadly based on the same science, so although some of the detail of the methodology may be different, the basis was much the same.</p> <p>Mark Lorimer (ML) of Inverboom raised the issue of the drop in deer numbers and queried what the point was in going to the expense of carrying out further surveys. His thoughts were that given there were less deer, there would therefore be less impact and whereas he was happy to incur the cost if there was a problem, he queried whether it was necessary, given deer numbers were falling. He also suggested that if it was to be agreed that the survey should continue to be undertaken, he would query the timing between surveys, should this be three years or should it be stretched to five.</p> <p>SC reiterated the need to demonstrate that the Groups were managing their areas properly and the survey work was very much part of that. The danger of not keeping the momentum going was that the Government might at some point revisit the issue of the “Voluntary Principle” and bring in more regulation.</p> <p>ML suggested that if we accept that we need to do the surveys, we really need to consider what the period should be between them and he was definitely in favour of stretching it to five years.</p> <p>BM/</p>	All

Item	Notes	Action
	<p>BM emphasised that we need to demonstrate that we are doing a good job and therefore recommended that the whole Group should revisit the plots this spring. RW mentioned Angus Davidson (AD) and his assistant, Colin, who would be able to help anyone who was having difficulties in doing this should that be necessary.</p> <p>After some debate RW recommended that members revisit all plots this year as it tied in with SNH Grant of £1800 and this was agreed to.</p> <p>AD queried whether there was any news on SWARD, the software used to analyse the habitat data, and SC confirmed that it was somewhat stuck in limbo.</p>	All
4.3	<u>Deer Population and Population Model</u>	
	<p>BM, who leads on this initiative, confirmed that the SNH helicopter count shows deer numbers for the Group area as a whole were down by about 3,000 animals, or 25% from the number counted some nine years ago. She mentioned concerns over the distinction between calves and yearlings and Norman Kelman (NK) highlighted this issue by reading part of the Letterewe Study Book which dealt with it.</p> <p>The meeting generally accepted that it was very difficult to separate big calves from small yearlings and that this was an issue for the Group in terms of interpreting the count data. SC confirmed that if anyone wanted to come into SNH to check the photographs for their estate, they would be very welcome. Kenny Ross (KR) confirmed that he had gone into the SNH office to have a look at their data and photographs and confirmed that he found it very difficult to tell the difference between yearlings and calves. KR's suggestion was that staff on the ground should go out and do sample foot counts to get a better idea of calving percentage. Ronnie Ross (RR), Lochrosque, advised that in his view it could be extremely difficult to distinguish between yearlings and calves, even with binoculars.</p> <p>BM talked about the movement of deer and her interest in it. Whereas most estates numbers were down, the numbers for Letterewe were up and the question was "where did they come from?"</p> <p>George Seligman (GS) queried how the model dealt with calf mortality, it being noted that for the calf mortality within the existing Population Model the assumption was 6%. David Bennett (DB) advised that at the feed, they had 96 hinds and only four calves. He went on to query whether SNH should use videos of deer groups rather than single frame photographs whereby with videos you can freeze frame and perhaps more accurate counts could be obtained. SC advised that they tend to use still photographs.</p> <p>NK</p>	

Item	Notes	Action
	<p>NK suggested that for the deer population model to be meaningful, we would need to use long term average figures for the assumptions rather than fluctuate the figures each year and RW agreed with this, advising that we need to decide on our own figures for the assumptions as regards stag mortality, hind mortality, calf mortality and projected calving rates.</p> <p>After extensive discussion on the count and the use of the data in the Deer Population Model, SC confirmed that what is being seen in the West Ross Deer Management Group area count is something that is being seen everywhere.</p> <p>RW thanked BM for attending the meeting, acknowledging that she had to leave for a funeral, but reminded the Group that further work would be undertaken on the Deer Population Model now that the accurate helicopter count had been undertaken and this would be an item that would appear again at the AGM where there could be a further discussion. The hope was that the Deer Population Model could be used as a guide/tool to assist the Group in deciding how to approach next season's cull.</p>	
5.0	<u>Strategic Native Woodland Expansions</u>	
	<p>KSB took the Group through a draft proposal which would form part of an application for a forestry cooperation grant for the opportunity mapping of new woodland creation in the West Ross Deer Management Group area. He advised the meeting that there were a number of high level datasets available in GIS format in the public domain that offer the potential for scale identification of sites, offering potential for new woodland creation. These are based on site suitability (ecological site classification), preference (Highland Forestry Strategy designations) and access (aerial photography, OS mapping). However, thus far these have not been considered at a sub-regional scale such as for the Group area.</p> <p>The aim of the project proposed was to take a strategic level approach to achieving one of the main objectives of the Group. The project seeks to look across the whole DMG area and create a strategic level map of opportunities for new woodland creation. The project will bring together key datasets already available in the public domain and use these as the basis for opportunity mapping.</p> <p>A methodology is proposed by which the information is distilled to identify those areas that offer a combination of great potential combined with practicality. The criteria will be those of habitat connectivity, preference location and accessibility. Considered together, the outputs will identify the hierarchy of sites offering the greatest potential for new native woodland creation.</p> <p>Outputs will be in the form of GIS layers. It will be up to individual partners and estates to decide whether these opportunities are consistent with their individual objectives and whether they wish to move them forward.</p> <p>It</p>	

Item	Notes	Action
	<p>It is an important objective of the Group members to consider expansion of woodland across the area. The advantages of new woodland creation are to improve the qualities of the landscape, enhance overall habitat quality and connectivity. For deer management purposes, there are the added advantages of creating shelter for deer, thereby assisting in management of deer movements and reducing mortality during severe winters. It is accepted that whilst forestry opportunities are currently being investigated at estate level, this has not been considered across the DMG as a whole.</p> <p>The proposal involves an application for funding under the Forestry Cooperation Fund and the plan is that if funding is secured, the work will be undertaken on a nil cost basis for the Group.</p> <p>After reading through the proposal, there was some discussion amongst the meeting, with RR mentioning the disadvantages of connectivity. Whereas connectivity in a woodland context is often a plus, the problem for deer management is that if connectivity is treated as a priority, the only losers will be the deer as often existing woodlands are on the low ground and if any further woodlands are to be relatively connected, further low ground is removed from the deer range.</p> <p>RW suggested that this piece of work would provide a rough guide for everyone to pick up on if they wished and therefore his view was that if funding was available, the Group should get on with it.</p> <p>NK, whilst agreeing that it was great to have new woodlands created and accepting that it provided long term shelter, urged caution as once a wood was established and thereafter deer were given access to the wood, the authorities may want deer numbers reduced. SC suggested this was a fascinating area of discussion as there are areas where there are dense populations of deer yet there are significant woodland areas. Therefore, it is a complex subject and clearly in some areas, additional woodlands allowed a greater number of deer to exist with less damage.</p> <p>Kevin Frediani (KF) of the National Trust stressed the importance of integrated land use and the need to find long term solutions where phasing would be important.</p> <p>RR reiterated the difficulty with woodlands in that they tended not to allow deer down to lower ground.</p> <p>GS of Strathbran suggested that it was important as part of this exercise to map shelter and overall his concern was that Strathbran was able to maintain its sporting cull.</p> <p>Concluding the discussion, the Chairman established that the general consensus was to get on with this piece of work and KSB was asked to instruct BL accordingly.</p>	<p>KSB</p>

Item	Notes	Action
6.0	<u>SNH and Funding Update</u>	
	<p>SC advised that SNH had a small amount of money to aid Groups in mapping/analysing of habitat impact assessment data and it was confirmed that an application had been made by the Group for £1,800 to enable Caroline Cook (CC) at Bowlts to collate and analyse the data in a digital map format and that this had been approved. Therefore, it was hoped that this work will commence shortly.</p> <p>SC also mentioned the assessment of the Group's Plan in 2013 and again in 2016 and confirmed that there would be a further review in 2019. ML queried who made the decision that there should be a further review in 2019 and SC confirmed that this was now enshrined in legislation.</p> <p>GS queried the level of SNH budget, SC replying that the budget was generally flat for the current year this being a reduction on previous years.</p>	
7.0	<u>Any Other Business</u>	
7.1	<u>Implication of Reduction in Deer Numbers</u>	
	<p>GS suggested that this was simply the most important issue to be discussed and that as a Group, we need to think carefully how we move forward in terms of deer culls, etc.</p> <p>RR suggested that with the deer losses in 2013/14, many estates had reduced their culls thereafter. However, the fact that Kinlochewe numbers are down has implications for neighbours who depend on Kinlochewe for their stags.</p> <p>AD advised that he shared the concern over the reduction in deer numbers but he also suggested that knowing more about the movement of deer was important. He highlighted this by advising that the foot count undertaken in Fannich in the spring of 2017 produced numbers almost double that of the helicopter count and he suspected that these numbers were not a simple reduction but were reflective of deer movement.</p> <p>RM advised that they will certainly do a summer count at Fannich but also mentioned having lost around 20 stags during the winter and that 50-60 hinds attending feed only had six calves running with them.</p> <p>SA queried whether, if we were having high morality, we should be culling more and there was a general agreement that if hinds were in poor condition, they should culled right up till the end of the season rather than having them die.</p> <p>KF also raised the issue, if there was quite a lot of mortality, of the carrying capacity of the habitat. He advised that there were more deer on National Trust low ground than there has probably ever been and as a result they had opened up some of the low ground to the deer simply on a welfare basis.</p> <p>RR/</p>	

Item	Notes	Action
	<p>RR advised that he had found very little evidence of beast mortality on the ground but that they had been feeding silage at Kinlochewe and he was amazed how some of the animals survived. He also made the comment that the severe weather over the winter had probably resulted in beasts moving and perhaps distorting some of the count data.</p> <p>KSB confirmed that the figures will be reworked, both retrospectively and looking forward, by BM and CC of his office and thereafter discussed more fully at the May AGM.</p> <p>KF queried whether we have done a scoping exercise to identify trends affecting our deer management and it was agreed that this was something that could usefully be picked up at a later date.</p>	BM/CC
9.0	<u>Date of Next Meeting</u>	
	The AGM will be held on 22 nd May 2018.	

The meeting was closed with the Chairman thanking everyone for attending. He also thanked all those who had put work in for all their hard work.