

**MINUTES OF MEETING OF THE WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP  
HELD AT ACHNASHEEN HALL, ACHNASHEEN RAILWAY STATION  
THURSDAY 8<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2018**

Present:	Randal Wilson Alasdair MacDonald Angus Davidson Gary Ross Norman Kelman Mark Lorimer Craig McIntosh Kevin Frediani Donald MacLeod Andrew Oliver Roddy Legge Kenny Ross Ronnie Ross David Bennett Donald Macrae	Chairman Dundonnell Fannich Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Inverbroom Inverewe Kinlochewe Letterewe Letterewe Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Strathbran Strathvaich
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt Caroline Cook Sinclair Coghill Tamara Lawson	Secretary/Treasurer Bowlts Chartered Surveyors SNH SNH
Apologies:	Iain Allison Stuart Allison Maurits van Dedem Ruari Matheson Hendrik van Beuningen Jake Buckthorp The Hon Mrs MacLay Barabara MacDonald George Seligman Mark Seligman Patrick Creasey Natasha Hutchison Nduri Abah Mary Gibson	Eilean Darach Eilean Darach Fannich Fannich Foich Foich Gruinard Letterewe Strathbran Strathbran Strathvaich Wester Ross Biosphere SNH SNH

The Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), welcomed everyone to the meeting. In doing so, he highlighted that there had been a meeting between himself, Ken Bowlt (KSB), with Victor Clements (VC) as part of the Group’s Deer Management Plan “health check”. He also advised that Barbara/

Barbara MacDonald (BM) and Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts met to progress the population model which would be discussed fully later in the meeting.

Lastly, RW confirmed that Ben Lennon (BL) of Bowlts had the necessary applications with SNH and the Forestry Collaboration Fund in respect of the peat wetland and woodland expansion work which was being proposed by the Group.

RW explained that he would work his way through the action plan which had been circulated to everyone and which he considered contained the focus for the Group's attention at the meeting.

The meeting then went on to discuss the following:-

1. **MINUTE OF MEETING HELD ON 29<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2018**

Action

The Minutes which were circulated previously were adopted, proposed by Kenny Ross (KR) and Donald MacLeod (DM).

2. **MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising from the previous meeting, it being agreed that all of the issues marked for action had either been completed or would be coming up later in the meeting.

3. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN HEALTH CHECK**

RW explained that the majority of Deer Management Groups were having their Deer Management Plans given a health check via the Association of Deer Management Groups, this in advance of the formal SNH assessments to be carried out in 2019. He noted that details of the health check, both in the form of the tables and the summary, had been circulated to members and he drew attention to the Group's total score increasing from 74 to 78, which expressed as a percentage, saw the Group's total score rising from 82% to 87%. VC's summary drew attention to the following points:-

- the need to focus on target population densities;
- the need to create a working action plan, a copy of which had been circulated with the papers for the meeting and which we would be working through;
- the need to increase the uptake of Scottish Quality Wild Venison membership;
- the possible creation of a category of "reporting members" to the Group.

Notwithstanding the above, RW highlighted the comment made by VC that in many aspects, the Group performs well and the overall impression is very good.

4./

#### 4. **PRIORITY ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

RW referred the meeting to the paper “Actions from Deer Management Plan” which collated all the information about the actions which the Group had taken, stemming from decisions made within the Deer Management Plan.

##### 4.1 **Designated Sites**

RW mentioned the updates noted in the paper, with five estates having designated sites affecting their property that are described as unfavourable. Notwithstanding this, the paper noted actions being taken, the last of which was that there was to be a discussion within SNH over the Fannich Hills SAC future management.

###### 4.1.1 **Plan Target 1**

RW confirmed that the Fannich Hills SAC population was currently well below target densities, as reflected in the recent deer count.

###### 4.1.2 **Plan Target 2**

RW took the Group through the update within the paper for this action, the most recent update being that SNH would contact Eilean Darach, Dundonnell and Gruinard with a view to holding a discussion and adjusting the management so that the habitat could be brought back into an improving status for the An Tseallach SSSI.

Tamara Lawton (TL) updated the Group by advising that it was hoped to appoint a contractor soon to meet with each of the three members with a view to drawing up a management plan for deer, stock and feral goats on the SSSI which might then be appended to the Group’s Deer Management Plan and might form the basis of a plan for any AECS application in the future. She explained that time was tight in terms of funding for this work but that it was hoped the deadlines would be met and progress could be made. RW thanked TL for her input and asked her to keep the Group informed of progress.

##### 4.2 **Retained Existing Native Woodland Cover**

RW ran through the updates within the paper and noted that there was still an issue to be resolved in terms of determining the methodology to be used for the survey of the existing native woodland cover. Mention was made at the/

the Group's May meeting of a report produced by Taylor Wildlife for the West Lochaber Deer Management Group which KSB referred to, advising that although the report was all very worthy and good stuff, there still was no common standard for carrying out the survey of such woodlands and determining what their exact purpose was. This still needs to be worked out at ADMG level. He explained that the West Lochaber Survey could well become the standard for rolling across the other areas, or it might not, in which case they have a red herring. Therefore, it was agreed that the Group should wait until a common standard was determined for the methodology of surveying the woodlands when further action could then be taken.

#### 4.3 **New Woodlands**

RW reviewed the action paper, noting that BL was submitting an application for funding to the Forestry Collaboration Fund and it was confirmed to the Group that this was in hand and was working its way through the system.

#### 4.4 **Carbon Sensitive Habitats**

Nduri Abah (NA) confirmed that the Group's application for a collaborative feasibility study is with SNH's case officer.

Sinclair Coghill (SC) explained that applications for this funding closed at the end of May and that SNH had concentrated on applications for actually doing work on the hill. He explained that SNH were only just getting round to looking at the feasibility studies and he thought that the Group might hear within the coming weeks as to the outcome of their application.

RW explained that he was now on his third phase of work on his family estate and that if anybody wanted to come and have a look, he would be very happy to arrange a visit for them with his team.

Angus Davidson (AD) confirmed that approval had now been received for a scheme on Fannich Estate and so it was noted by the Group that progress was being made by some members on the carbon sensitive habitats.

#### 4.5 **Habitat Monitoring**

RW ran the Group through the paper, noting the final update to the action plan was that CC confirmed in May that she didn't yet have everyone's habitat monitoring data, with all members being encouraged to feed this through via KSB. CC confirmed that she had now obtained most data, in multiple formats, which had posed some difficulty in terms of entering the data on the mapping system. She suggested that in future, she would issue a template/

template so that everyone returned their data in the same format and in such a way that it could be entered within the mapping system reasonably simply.

CC

It was noted by the meeting that the Group would have to agree target percentages of plots within each category, for example low/low medium impact, with SC suggesting that this level might be 90%. In other words, 90% of the samples should be in the low to low medium impact category. It was understood that there would require to be further discussion on this once all the data was available.

Mark Lorimer (ML) queried whether the impact of all herbivores was taken into account, it being noted that at this stage, there was no way to distinguish between the impact of deer as against that of sheep, goats and other herbivores. The conflict between different department's policies was noted, e.g. between the agriculture department, which may encourage people to keep sheep on ground, and SNH which would prefer not to have them. It was acknowledged that there had to be some joined up thinking within the policy makers to assist.

#### 4.6 **Public Access**

RW led the Group through the action paper, noting the latest update in May 2018 showing that KSB had written to all of the members who had yet to submit their details to the "Heading for the Scottish Hills" website. Gary Ross (GR) of Gruinard explained that he had been endeavouring to have an entry loaded onto the system for Gruinard, but he had found interacting with SNH extremely difficult and time consuming. TL kindly agreed that she could help in any liaison required with Fiona Cunningham within SNH and therefore it was hoped that that problem could be resolved imminently.

TL

Mention was made that Dundonnell, Eilean Darach and Lochluichart still had to load up entries and RW encouraged these so that the Group could complete the picture.

#### 4.7 **Deer Population and Population Model**

RW took the Group through the two plan targets for deer population and population model, noting the updated position as follows:-

4.7.1/

#### 4.7.1 Plan Target 1

He noted that BM and CC had been working on developing/fine tuning a simple population model based on local data to provide guidance to the Group in terms of setting cull targets over the long term.

#### 4.7.2 Plan Target 2

Acknowledging that the population model was evolving, RW emphasised the need for data to improve the reliability and accuracy of the model.

CC ran through the model, describing how it worked and showing how, in order to have a population large enough to support the Group's historic culling levels of around 400 stags per year, there would probably require to be a relatively drastic reduction in both hind and stag culls over the coming five years.

RW mentioned the unprecedented deer mortality post-hind season, this being confirmed by Craig McIntosh (CM) of Inverbroom who said that Inverbroom had experienced very high mortality this last season, especially amongst the calves. Norman Kelman (NK) of Heights of Kinlochewe suggested that mortality was probably up nearer 30% rather than the 20% illustrated by CC in the model. NK advised that even now, in November, before the winter had really started, they were continuing to lose deer. He mentioned rain every day for 78 days and that this type of weather had a very hard effect on the population. However, he did confirm that he had plenty mature stags, although very few hinds on Heights during the season, and saw little evidence of the rut.

The theme of the late rut was echoed by Ronnie Ross (RR) who wondered what this would mean for next year, with calves being born later than normal. There was some discussion about what the average calving rate was, with RR saying that his experience suggested never more than 25% and probably down as low as 15%.

KSB advised that Jake Buckthorp (JB) of Foich had, in tendering his apologies for the meeting, advised that they had great difficulty in finding mature stags and that he didn't see any evidence of the rut starting until 19th October.

As a result of the discussion, CC inputted mortality of 30% which simply showed that in order for the Group to return to a population able to sustain/

sustain the sporting cull of about 400 stags per year, the cut back would have to be even more severe.

RW stressed the importance of summer foot counts in terms of getting a better idea of recruitment and generally the need for the Group to get as good data as they possibly can to feed into the model so that sensible decisions could be made looking forward to the future.

It was agreed that CC would input any further data she could and then issue copies of the population model to each member which would give an idea of what the collaborative cull target should be for the Group as a whole and then each estate could make its own decision in the light of this on its culling levels. However, the general message from RW was that culling would have to be undertaken with a light touch in the coming seasons.

CC

ML queried the implications for the Section 7 Agreement of the data showing the decline in deer numbers, with SC indicating that they would need to see the habitat impact data produced next spring before making any final decisions.

There was discussion on the issue of public access moving/disturbing deer and other wildlife and whether at some point, something would have to be done about this.

AD suggested that trampling targets may need to be reviewed and SC agreed that this was perfectly possible.

Kevin Frediani (KF) of the National Trust suggested that, as a result of climate change, the West Ross area was probably getting 50 mm more rain per annum than it did 30 years ago. Therefore, habitat management might need to be thought of in terms of “adaptation” rather than mitigation. His suggestion was that the formula may have changed, but we don’t yet know the algorithm.

Whilst discussing the issue of deer numbers and the unprecedented mortality, RW raised the issue of deer escaping through cut fences on the Beinn Eighe/Kinlochewe march which resulted in almost 200 deer being shot within the Beinn Eighe Nature Reserve by SNH staff. The suggestion from RW was that SSE may have left gates open and cut fences during their works. The point he wished to emphasise was that at a time when deer numbers were under unprecedented pressure, there must be more communication and it should have been obvious to the SNH staff that the deer were coming from somewhere and there should have been discussion with neighbours.

ML/

ML queried the SNH policy on fencing, asking why, if they needed to protect young plantations they didn't just fence them. SC clarified that SNH had a "no fencing" policy.

#### 4.8 **Deer Welfare**

RW took the Group through the plan target updates for deer welfare, noting that the last point in May 2018 requested all members to provide information on recruitment and mortality.

After some discussion, it was agreed that KSB would re-issue the form from Bill Whyte, asking members to complete this for the previous season before returning to him.

KSB

#### 4.9 **Non-Native Species**

RW advised the Group that this action had been completed.

### 5. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

#### 5.1 **Deer Management Group Formal Assessment 2019**

SC advised that the assessments would probably be carried out in April/May 2019, with a report being prepared and thereafter submitted to the Government in the autumn of 2019.

SC also advised that the Deer Group would be reporting to the Cabinet Minister on their work in spring 2019 and that work was in hand with the Lowland Deer Panel.

#### 5.2 **Heather Beetle**

David Bennett (DB) of Strathbran mentioned that heather beetle had hit Strathbran hard and queried whether anyone else had the same problem. RR confirmed that Kinlochewe had the same problem and it was noted by the meeting that the hill would probably take a long time to recover from this infestation.

### 6. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

RW advised that KSB would be in touch with a view to having another meeting in late March/early April 2019.

KSB

In closing the meeting, RW once again thanked everyone for taking the time to attend.