

**MINUTES OF MEETING OF THE WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
HELD AT ACHNASHEEN HALL, ACHNASHEEN RAILWAY STATION
WEDNESDAY 13th NOVEMBER 2019**

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| Present: | Randal Wilson Alasdair MacDonald Angus Davidson Alex Stoddart Jake Buckthorp The Hon Mrs J MacLay Norman Kelman Mark Lorimer Craig McIntosh Davie Neilson Andrew Oliver Kenny Ross Ronnie Ross Donald MacLeod David Bennett Donald Macrae | Chairman Dundonnell Fannich Fannich Foich Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Kinlochewe Strathbran Strathvaich |
| In Attendance: | Ken Bowlt Tamara Lawton Jamie Bain | Secretary/Treasurer Scottish Natural Heritage Lochluichart Estate |
| Apologies: | Donald Rice Stuart Allison Ruari Matheson Hendrick van Beuningen Gary Ross Kevin Frediani Barbara MacDonld Paul Swan George Seligman Mark Seligman Nduri Abah Natasha Hutchison | Dundonnell Eilean Darach Fannich Foich Gruinard Inverewe Letterewe Letterewe Strathbran Strathbran Scottish Natural Heritage Wester Ross Biosphere |

The Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and thanking them for attending.

The meeting then went on to discuss the following:-

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1. MINUTE OF MEETING HELD ON 28th MARCH 2019Action

The Minutes, which had been circulated previously, were adopted by the Group, proposed by Mark Lorimer (ML) and seconded by The Hon Mrs J MacLay (JM).

2. MATTERS ARISING

No matters arose which required discussion, it being agreed that all of the issues marked for action had either been completed or would be discussed later in the meeting.

3. PRIORITY ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN

RW drew the meeting's attention to the paper apart previously circulated to members, highlighting the action list for the Deer Management Plan, which has been used as a management tool for the Group for some time. As in previous working meetings, he advised that he intended to work through the action plan, topic by topic, which he did as follows:-

3.1 Designated Sites**3.1.1 Plan Target 1**

RW read out the first target; namely that any designated sites currently described as "unfavourable" as a consequence of herbivore impact will have deer management in place to work towards favourable/unfavourable recovering status.

RW briefed the meeting on the Fannich Hills Section 7 Agreement meeting held some two weeks ago, with the survey evidence confirming improvement in habitat, with deer numbers down. The improvement had been such that there had been discussions about whether the Section 7 Agreement was still required, but no final decision had been made on this. It was also noted that the additional plots requested previously by the Group had been incorporated by SNH in their 2019 survey and the results from the additional plots reflected the overall improvement.

3.1.2 Plan Target 2

RW reminded the Group of the target to review the status of all designated sites within the Group area and to facilitate any actions that may be required. At that point, Tamara Lawton (TL) confirmed the appointment of Linzi Seivwright to pull together a Management Plan for the An Teallach SSSI, involving Eilean Darach, Dundonnell and Guinard/

Gruinard Estates. When queried on timeframe by RW, TL indicated that it was hoped Linzi would be able to pull the Management Plan together by the end of January 2020, given that some work had already been carried out.

3.2 **Existing Native Woodland**

RW reported no change in the position in that the Group were waiting for a decision to be made as to a common standard with regard to the methodology for any survey work on existing woodlands before any work would be undertaken. This issue had previously been referred to the ADMG, who would no doubt be consulting with SNH, and once a decision is made, Group members would be briefed and a way forward considered.

3.3 **New Woodlands**

RW highlighted the Deer Management Plan target to encourage the possibility of woodland expansion in the context of Deer Management Group needs. As part of that, in the event of woodland expansion being undertaken by Group members, consideration would be given to deer population levels via the Deer Population Model, with regard also being hand for any changes in range, forage and shelter.

RW was pleased to report that approval had now been obtained from Forestry Scotland for a grant for the collaborative work previously discussed to be undertaken.

He advised that Dr Ben Lennon (BL) of Bowlts had now completed the background GIS mapping work, and would be undertaking basic walk-over site work to proof the findings. BL hoped that a draft report would be prepared by the end of the year and that he would be able to report to the Group at the March 2020 meeting. The intention is that BL would be in touch with estates with a view to organising site visits. Ken Bowlts (KSB) encouraged everyone to interact with BL so that their thoughts could be incorporated into the work.

3.4 **Carbon Sensitive Habitats**

RW reminded the meeting of the Plan target for the Group to consider opportunities and priorities for the creation and restoration of peatlands, identifying funding sources where possible. In addition, the Group has undertaken to encourage members to minimise surface damage to peatland.

RW noted that at the AGM in June this year, it was reported that there was less funding available and in future, feasibility work would be done on an estate/

estate by estate basis by SNH officers. TL advised that since then, matters had changed significantly, a greater level of funding had been made available, and SNH would now possibly consider applications for collaborative funding. It was agreed that KSB would ask BL to once again contact Nduri Abah with a view to seeing whether, if not this year, then possibly next year, work could be done on a collaborative basis by the Group to highlight the opportunities with regard to possibly creating and restoring peatlands.

KSB

RW confirmed that he was aware that both Fannich and Kinlochewe were involved with the Peatland Action initiative. Jamie Bain (JB) of Lochluichart confirmed that they were looking to start some work and JM advised that Gruinard were also looking to possibly do something at some point in the future. The meeting noted therefore that notwithstanding the inability to move forward on a collaborative basis, individual members within the Group were focussing on this target.

3.5 **Habitat Monitoring**

RW acknowledged that a great deal of work had been done by the Group over the last few years in terms of assessing impact on the various habitats and that the Group had been able to look at some of the data at the AGM, which Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts had mapped. He also reminded the Group that at the AGM, a Group target had been set at 85% for each type of habitat within the low/medium bracket. It was acknowledged that not a huge improvement was required to achieve this, but nevertheless, action was required.

There was further discussion on the areas where previous high impact had been shown, there being some debate about whether this was actually deer or sheep. There was also discussion with Alasdair MacDonald (AM) of Dundonnell regarding the choice of sites, it being agreed that these would probably be better being randomised. KSB confirmed that plots had been sent to AM and RW suggested that perhaps Angus Davidson (AD) could assist with this, the message being that if AM required any help, he only needed to ask.

AM explained the problem was that he had limited time to do sample plots and in terms of people coming to help him, there may be a funding issue. Nevertheless, it was hoped that by randomising plot numbers, not necessarily increasing the number of plots, a better picture could be achieved of the impacts out towards the Scoraig Peninsula on Dundonnell.

JB/

JB confirmed that he had forwarded his plot data to KSB and that it was perfectly in order for this to be loaded onto the Deer Group maps. KSB confirmed that he would advise CC accordingly.

KSB

3.6 **Public Access**

RW reminded the Group of the target to encourage members to upload information to the SNH Outdoor Access Code website – “Heading for the Scottish Hills”. It was noted that KSB had checked the website and it appeared that the only two members requiring to get information on the website were Eilean Darach and Dundonnell.

AM confirmed that he had issued an email to KSB indicating what he would like to get up on the site. TL indicated that she would help link Mark Wrightman with SNH with AM. KSB confirmed that Mark Wrightman had been copied in on recent correspondence and therefore it was hoped that an entry could be loaded for Dundonnell.

TL/AM

JB confirmed that he would investigate whether an entry was required for Lochluichart, following KSB indicating to him that there was a blank entry for Beinn Liath Mhor a’ Ghiubhaisli.

There was then general discussion on the usefulness of the Heading for the Scottish Hills website with both Ronnie Ross (RR) and Kenny Ross (KR) confirming that calls are coming through. Generally these were helpful, with people trying to avoid disturbing stalkers, although there was also considerable discussion on disruptive public access being reported.

JM queried whether there had been any increase in access following the publishing of the “Open Bothy” book and there didn’t seem to be any consensus as to whether people had noted any actual increase in access or not.

3.7 **Deer Population and Population Model**

RW acknowledged that the Group were familiar with all the work that had been undertaken on developing our Population Model, which had been discussed at previous meetings and the most recent AGM, with an in principle decision to see a collaborative reduction of 20% in the stag cull and to endeavour to maintain the five year average cull figures for hinds for the next season. He also acknowledged that since June, a lot of time had been spent on the hill and he felt it would be useful for there to be a discussion on what people were finding and for the Group to consider how this might impact on the collaborative approach in terms of the figures being produced by the Deer Population Model.

Importantly/

Importantly, RW asked everyone to confirm their stag cull figures to KSB so that the Population Model could be updated.

All

RW also requested the Group to confirm the count programme for coming seasons; namely:-

- Spring – total population foot count;
- May – recruitment sample counts.

Without a great deal of discussion, the Group agreed in principle on this and therefore the two previously appointed count coordinators, Jake Buckthorp (JB) from Foich and KR from Lochrosque were asked to note this and to plan for these counts.

RW then invited members to report how the season went:-

- **Craig McIntosh (CM) - Inverbroom.** CM advised that they were concerned about the late calving rates, largely as a result of the lateness of the previous rut and therefore of calving survivability. He indicated that they intended to be very selective in terms of the coming hind cull. On this point, RR suggested that people should be very careful and perhaps wait until the New Year before finally deciding on the extent of their hind cull.
- **Kenny Ross, Lochrosque.** KR advised that they had shot 23 stags, this being less than planned. However, he confirmed that in the last week of the season, there were a few more mature stags about, and that their thought looking forward was that maybe next year they might put the stag cull back up to 35-40.
- **Norman Kelman (NK), Heights of Kinlochewe.** Firstly NK advised that he had no intention of shooting any hinds. The number of hinds at Heights was very low. However, he did report that there were plenty mature stags on his ground during the season. RR suggested that perhaps the previous year's cutback has paid off in terms of more stags being about.
- **Jake Buckthorp (JB), Foich.** JB confirmed that they had shot 23 stags. The rut was good and the stags were generally in good condition, with mature stags being evident. With regard to hinds, Foich intended to approach the cull cautiously.
- **Andrew/**

- **Andrew Oliver (AO), Letterewe.** AO advised that he had shot about 32 stags and that the plan for the whole of Letterewe was to take about 80 hinds. He reported that calves were generally in good condition.
- **The Hon Mrs J MacLay (JM), Gruinard.** JM advised that they had shot 21 stags but that they planned to go very canny with the hinds, and maybe take 20.
- **Mark Lorimer (ML), Inverbroom.** On the historic SNH cull, ML advised that he had submitted a Freedom of Information request to SNH on the deer cull carried out within the Group area in the 17/18 season where some 120 stags had been shot, largely out of season. TL explained that this issue had been talked through, the main problem being that gates had been left open and deer were allowed to come from parts of the Deer Management Group area onto the Beinn Eighe Nature Reserve. She also explained that because there had not been a stalker for a number of years previously there was probably a backlog of culling required. However, she confirmed that the high cull was a one-off and unlikely to be repeated. However, despite ML asking for an undertaking that it wouldn't be repeated, it was accepted that this was unlikely to be forthcoming from SNH. RW explained that it was his fence that was breached, allegedly by Scottish & Southern Energy, in carrying out some of their maintenance work. JB suggested it was disappointing that no communication had been forthcoming from SNH to their neighbours prior to this cull having been undertaken. However, it was noted that the lines of communication are now open, with RW having met with the various players within SNH, and it was hoped that lessons have been learnt but we now need to move on. RR explained that he had an issue with deer being shot adjacent to the road with spotlights in woods as was the case with the SNH cull and suggested this was a very unsporting way to cull deer. TL explained that the culling was being carried out for the protection of the woods and that is probably why there were high numbers in the woodland area. To conclude the discussion on this issue, ML kindly agreed to keep the Group posted on his enquiries. RW suggested that ML have a discussion with Richard Cooke of the Association who had been involved in this matter. ML
- **Angus Davidson (AD), Fannich.** AD confirmed that 25 stags had been shot and that a good rut had been observed. He confirmed that there were a few late calves about, but also quite a number of calves in good condition. He reported that the intention at Fannich was to take about 20 hinds in the coming season.
- **David/**

- **David Bennett (DB), Strathbran.** DB advised that some 17 stags had been shot on Strathbran against a target of 18, although he did report that there were not a lot of mature stags. He also made the point that following the purchase of the Grudie Oakwood by Strathbran Estate, their stag cull via the model had increased, but they had decided to restrict their target given the uncertainty over how sporting the cull over the Grudie Oakwood by the Forestry Commission had been previously. DB also raise the issue that they did not see a lot of mature stags, or a lot of what he called travelling stags, these being “marauding” stags, coming from other parts of the Group area. He reported that he had not seen stags coming in over the last two to three years as he had been accustomed to see some years ago. He reported seeing some good, strong calves but indicated that they would only be shooting hinds as deemed necessary in the coming season.
- **Alasdair MacDonald (AM), Dundonnell.** AM reported some 20 stags shot and that as far as the hinds cull was concerned, they would be shooting the bare minimum.
- **Jamie Bain (JB), Lochluichart.** JB advised that Lochluichart had shot 33 stags against a target of 39, with an average larder weight of 14 st 6 lbs. Given what had been seen on the estate, the thought was that they would be carrying on, shooting perhaps 30-35 stags over the next five years. On hinds, JB suggested that Lochluichart would shoot only what was necessary.

KSB was asked to collate the stag culls and at some point incorporate the figures into the Model.

KSB

3.8 Deer Welfare

KSB confirmed that the amended larder sheet had been issued to all members and that the majority of the Group, with the exception of Dundonnell, Eilean Darach, Lochrosque and the Forestry Commission, had returned the data. KSB agreed to re-issue the sheets to those who had not yet submitted a return.

KSB

JB of Lochluichart confirmed that he would forward Lochluichart data to KSB and indicated that this would be in the same as the format as they use for the Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) Scheme.

KSB confirmed that once all the data had been received, thought would be given as to how this could be used in terms of analysing the information in such a way that it could be usefully incorporated into the Deer Management Plan/

Plan and deer management process, and possibly give the Group an insight into deer welfare when taken together with appropriate data on mortality and recruitment.

There followed some discussion on SQWV, with the Group being reminded of George Seligman's positive report on the Strathbran experience of using the free SQWV' assessment. Once again, RW reiterated the benefits to the deer industry of the SQWV Scheme, it being thought that at some point, there might be a compulsory scheme in terms of public health, traceability, etc. and so it was probably better to explore things now.

4. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

4.1 **Radio Channel**

KR of Lochrosque confirmed that he had been in touch with Donnie at Scottish Communications and that the plan was that he might come up and tune everyone's radios, but that information on everyone's radios would need to be collated in advance so that this could be fed back to Donnie. It was acknowledged that an application had to be made to Ofcom for a licence for a deer channel which could be used by the Group members. This licence would cost £75 and it was agreed that this could be met from Group funds.

KSB gave KR the Ofcom application form and it was agreed that between Donnie and KR, they would get things organised.

KR

4.2 **Venison**

KR mentioned an experience his wife had in overhearing a conversation about a white van, very well equipped for dealing with venison carcasses, the suggestion being that there was still active poaching on the go and that the Group should remain vigilant.

RW talked about the use of thermal imaging and the experience of a heat bubble on a knoll turning out the head of a wild camper, this being a cautionary tale on the use of thermal imaging and making sure that any targets identified were truly legitimate targets.

5. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held on Wednesday 11th March 2020.