

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
HELD VIA ZOOM  
WEDNESDAY 4<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2020**

Present:	Randal Wilson Donald Rice Angus Davidson Hendrick van Beuningen Jake Buckthorp Aiden Bell Barbara MacDonald Kenny Ross Edgar Seligman Jos Seligman Tom Cameron	Chairman Dundonnell Fannich Foich Foich Inverewe Letterewe Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich Strathbran Strathbran Forestry and Land Scotland
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt Caroline Cook Richard Cooke Sinclair Coghill Tamara Lawton Megan Rowland Natasha Hutchison Jamie Bain	Secretary/Treasurer Bowlts Chartered Surveyors ADMG NatureScot NatureScot NatureScot Wester Ross Biosphere Lochluichart Estate
Apologies:	Gary Ross Norman Kelman Mark Lorimer Craig McIntosh Andrew Oliver Kenny MacLean	Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Inverbroom Letterewe Garve & District Community Council

**I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRMAN**

Action

In welcoming everyone to the meeting, the Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), acknowledged that the AGM had been delayed this year due to the current and ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Since a face to face meeting was not possible, it had been decided to hold a Zoom meeting, which allowed us to deal with the formalities and ongoing work of the Group.

RW highlighted that since the Group last met in March 2020, there had been a great deal to ponder as a result of the Covid-19 crisis in terms of disruption to sporting lets, culls and lowering venison prices. However, whilst acknowledging that these elements/

elements had had an impact on revenue and employment, he emphasised that we must not let the venison trade be an excuse to ease off on our hind cull.

Whilst acknowledging that some estates did not shoot their expected stag cull for a variety of reasons, the consensus seemed to be that there were plenty of stags about, with a more typical rut this year, which was all good to see.

RW advised that time had been spent on the population model by himself, Ken Bowlts (KSB) and Angus Davidson (AD), both for the group as a whole and the Section 7 control area, and both exercises tell the same story – a fast increasing population. RW indicated that the meeting would discuss the population model, but stressed that the group must, at the very least, cull maintenance this winter, or there was the risk of jeopardising the Fannich Hills Section 7 Management Agreement if we cannot as a group demonstrate the collective ability of our deer group to keep on top of our deer population. RW mentioned the difficulties being experienced by the North Ross DMG, where NatureScot have imposed a Section 7 Agreement on all of the estates within their group so as to protect the Beinn Dearg SAC and that he did not want to see this happen in our group, so stressed that a collaborative and collective response is required by us all.

RW advised that within the Fannich Hills Section 7 area, there had been an increase of 42% in the deer population between 2018 and the official count in February 2020. He suggested it was safe to assume the same increase across the group as a whole, particularly with our hind cull being as low as it was last year. This surge in population demonstrates the need for action.

With more deer migration being apparent, RW suggested that an increased cull within the Fannich Hills SAC area might only result in a greater migration of deer to that area from the wider group area and therefore the need for a collective response this winter is paramount.

RW welcomed three newcomers to the meeting, Jos and Edgar Seligman from Strathbran and Megan Rowland from NatureScot. He advised that Mark and George Seligman had decided to hand over the reins to the next generation and he gave a big thank you to Mark and George for their contribution to the group over the years and confirmed that they would be missed.

Lastly, RW advised that the ADMG Chairman, Richard Cooke (RC), was present to give the Association's perspective on the current political challenges and the report of the Deer Working Group and how much of it may be implemented. RW extended a thank you to RC for joining us.

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## 2. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 5<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2019**

### 2.1 **Adoption**

The meeting adopted the Minutes as an accurate record of the previous AGM, this being proposed by Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran and seconded by AD of Fannich.

### 2.2 **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising, it being agreed that all of the issues noted as being actionable in the previous Minutes had either been dealt with or would be dealt with through items on the Agenda.

## 3. **DRAFT FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 30<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2019 and 2020**

KSB took the Group through the income and expenditure accounts previously circulated to the membership.

The draft financial position as at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019 and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 was presented in the usual format, a single page report showing actuals for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. He highlighted that due to the slippage with the AGM, we were in effect reporting on two years' actual figures (the years to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019 and 2020) whereas we usually only reported on one year. That apart, he indicated that the Accounts were in the same format as previous years.

KSB explained that the first two columns showed the actual figures for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019 against the approved budget for that year. The second two columns showed the actual figures for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 against the draft budget for that year. The next column, shaded green, showed the draft budget for the coming year, to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

KSB suggested that the figures showed that there was very little discrepancy between the budget and actuals.

There being no queries from the floor, the figures were adopted by the meeting, proposed by Hendrick van Beuningen (HvB) of Foich and ES of Strathbran.

4./

#### 4. **BUDGET FOR THE YEAR TO 30th SEPTEMBER 2021**

##### 4.1 **Budget**

KSB highlighted for the group the column shaded green on the income and expenditure account page, this being the budgeted figures for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021, which he confirmed were very much in line with previous years.

The budget was adopted by the meeting, again approved by HvB of Foich and ES of Strathbran.

##### 4.2 **Members Subscriptions**

The meeting reviewed the proposed subscription schedule previously circulated and agreed to the subscriptions proposed, proposed by HvB of Foich and ES of Strathbran.

There was a query from ES re: the allocation of the subscriptions which historically has been on the basis of the previous year's stag figures. After some discussion, it was agreed to retain this allocation but to possibly keep this under review in future years.

#### 5. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

##### 5.1 **Review of Actions Arising from the Deer Management Plan**

###### 5.1.1 **Designated Sites**

RW reminded the group that one of the DMP targets was that designated sites which were currently described as “unfavourable” as a consequence of herbivore impact will have deer management in place to work towards favourable/recovering status. The action being required for this was to develop an action plan for sites in unfavourable condition and explore funding options.

Mention was made of the additional survey plots being undertaken as part of the Fannich Hills SSSI survey work, the hope being that this would provide better quality data for the group's use. Tamara Lawton (TL) of NatureScot confirmed that the additional 100 plots had been incorporated but that the final report had yet to be finalised. However, funding was available for this and hopefully it would be available shortly.

There/

There was then some discussion about the Fannich Hills SAC Section 7 Agreement area with Jamie Bain (JB) of Lochluichart confirming that he had been in discussion with Kenny Ross (KR) of Lochrosque and that Lochluichart were planning to shoot around 100 hinds, with some 50 having been shot so far. His estimate was that there had been around 40% calving this year and the need to cull was self-evident. HvB of Foich advised that in the last two years, Foich hadn't done a great deal of hind culling, but that this year they planned to cull perhaps 60-70 hinds plus perhaps 20 calves. RW confirmed the general consensus that there needed to be focus on the hind cull. KR of Lochrosque indicated that they planned to take perhaps 60 hinds and 20 calves in the SAC area and perhaps 135 hinds plus calves on the whole estate. Jake Buckthorp (JB) of Foich indicated that he had gone light on hinds for now, and his thoughts were that they would perhaps get a few early, but be cautious in case of a hard winter. AD of Fannich advised that they were intending to take some 40 hinds and to take some early and see how the season goes. He indicated that whilst there was a positive picture with regard to the habitat assessment carried out within the Fannich Hills SAC area, there still needed to be sharp focus on the control of hind numbers.

#### 5.1.2 Retaining Existing Native Woodland Cover

RW reminded the group of the problem of methodology, which issue was still with the ADMG for guidance. RC advised that this issue now rested with NatureScot to come up with the methodology. Sinclair Coghill (SC) of NatureScot advised that the issue of the methodology to be used had been with the Best Practice Steering Group and it was hoped that output should be available from spring 2021.

RW confirmed that once the Best Practice Steering Group had issued something on the methodology, it would be considered by the group with a view to seeing how matters could be moved forward on this part of the group's action plan.

#### 5.1.3 New Woodlands

RW highlighted to the group Dr Ben Lennon's report on the woodland creation opportunities within the group area.

Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe advised that they had just completed a planting and suggested that this could perhaps be added to the group's maps within the DMP.

CC

JB/

JB advised that Foich were hoping to fell and replant woodlands, but also advised that the felling had been delayed due to Covid-19.

#### 5.1.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

RW updated the group, advising that progress had been made by Fannich, Lochluichart and Lochrosque, with AD indicating that he was looking at Gruinard and Foich for potential areas for projects. Jos Seligman (JS) of Strathbran indicated that he would be interested in exploring possibilities for Strathbran.

TL of NatureScot confirmed that they were pleased to see applications coming in and that they were trying to make the funding system more user friendly, perhaps such that a collaborative group application might be coped with at some point in the future.

In terms of updating the DMP maps, RW asked AD to send shape files of all peatland schemes undertaken to Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts so that these could be shown on the group's maps.

AD/CC

Donald Rice (DR) of Dundonnell confirmed that they were trying to get a further scheme underway.

RC of the ADMG indicated that the bottleneck in this sort of work was the lack of contractors available to carry out the projects and therefore the ADMG was trying to persuade the authorities to help fund equipment/training to allow estates to do work themselves.

#### 5.1.5 Habitat Monitoring

RW reminded the group of the planned target for each habitat type and that it would soon be time for the second series of plot samples to be undertaken. There was an awareness that some members may have undertaken plot samples since the beginning and if they had, CC asked that everyone send in any data that had collected. She also suggested that in terms of the upcoming plot surveys, if anyone needs any help with the coordinates for their existing plots, they should ask her.

All

RW indicated that the discussion was just a reminder that it would soon be time to do the sample plots again and it would be fascinating to see the results.

SC advised that there would soon be revised guidance and spreadsheets being issued by the Best Practice Steering Group. It was thought/

thought that these might be available in spring 2021 and as soon as they were available, KSB confirmed that we would circulate the information around the group.

KSB

#### 5.1.6 Public Access

There was some discussion about everyone having entries included in the “Heading for the Scottish Hills” website and DR of Dundonnell confirmed that he would chase this up to ensure that they were included.

DR

DR also queried whether anyone within the group had experience of canyoning and how to deal with it from a management point of view. He advised that one man had drowned within the last 18 months on Dundonnell following the use of remote canyoning sites on Dundonnell.

Aiden Bell (AB) of Inverewe confirmed that he was happy to share the National Trust’s experience in the Corrieshalloch Gorge with DR and both DR and AB agreed to catch up later to discuss.

RW confirmed that there was an awareness of an increase in access pressure due to Covid-19, particularly following the easing of lockdown. This was confirmed by RC of the ADMG who suggested there was an explosion of access into the countryside after lockdown. He suggested it would be good for the group to refer any particular issues to Frank Spencer-Nairn, who is on the Access Forum of the ADMG. He talked about signing, if NatureScot agree to it, warnings, etc.

#### 5.1.7 Deer Population and Population Model

RW thanked members of the group for submitting their recruitment counts, confirming that the collation of such data was vital to make the deer population model a useful tool to help inform decision making about the management of the deer population. He then asked KSB to run through the workings of the model, which he did by sharing his screen showing the model with the meeting. KSB started, as he did last year, by looking at the historic sporting cull taken by group members, which could be reasonably estimated at 400 stags. He then drew members’ attention to the small grey shaded box at the top right hand side of the model, showing that in order for the population to provide the aspirational annual sporting cull of 400 stags, it would be necessary to have a population of 3,000 stags within the/

the group area. Then, depending on the stag:hind cull ratio chosen, this could mean that a total population of 6,000 animals on a 1:1 basis or 6,750 on a 1:1.25 ratio.

KSB confirmed that this year, the recruitment count suggested a recruitment figure of 28%, significantly up on previous years, and advised that this effectively resulted in a surge in deer numbers. He then drew the group's attention to the planned culls in years ahead relative to the average culls and this showed that in order to keep deer numbers at similar levels to the previous helicopter count that hind cull numbers would have to increase significantly for each year of the proposed plan.

There followed a group discussion on the population model, with BM of Letterewe noting that the figures in the model were based on the five year average, whereas Letterewe Estate based its cull on its summer helicopter count. She advised that this year, Letterewe shot 30 stags. She also asked the meeting to note that in the previous five years, Letterewe had already held back on stag numbers, but were now beginning to see more on the ground. As far as hind cull for the 2020-21 season, the plan was to shoot 60-80 hinds.

AD of Fannich confirmed that they had tried to get a good recruitment count and to base the cull on that. He was convinced that there was more merit in taking a good recruitment count and then basing culls on that as opposed to anything else. ES suggested that from what they had seen on the ground at Strathbran, they may need to shoot more hinds, say 10-15. However, he confirmed that they would be unable to hit the stag numbers shown in the population model.

KR of Lochrosque expressed concern about the rumours in the venison market that there may be no market come the New Year and therefore this suggested to him that hind culls need to start quickly and get the bulk of the cull over by the New Year.

JB of Lochluichart advised that venison prices had now gone down to about £1.00 per kilo from Ardgay Game and suggested that the group may struggle to find a market for late culled hinds and therefore the message was to get going with the cull early. He suggested that Lochluichart were comfortable taking about 40 stags and that they may go for a minimum of 100 hinds, depending on migration. JB of Foich suggested that they had taken 15 stags but they wanted to be cautious on hinds as they worried about the impact of a/  
a/



a bad winter. RW suggested that they should perhaps not be too cautious, given the warning signs that were coming out on the surge in population. JB confirmed that calving had been high this year.

HvB of Foich confirmed their plan to take 60-70 hinds, 40 before Christmas. KR of Lochrosque suggested that the stalkers need to keep in touch with one another and possibly give each other a hand if that was what was required to get the early culls taken.

SC of NatureScot confirmed that they were watching the market position closely and that they will try to be as supportive as possible. He agreed that it was a good idea to get the culls going early but stressed that the Scottish Government is aware there is a potential issue on the horizon with the venison market. KSB agreed to circulate the proposed cull figures for the group as a whole, with RW reminding everyone that the group should be conscious that the population model was a useful tool to help inform decision making about the management of the deer population.

KSB

However, RW stressed that each member had to look at their own recruitment count, and if their recruitment count was higher than that shown in the model, they may think about increasing their culls, and if it was lower, they might ease up a bit. It was also clear that in planning for the group as a whole, there were one or two anomalies such as Strathbran, where the figures were perhaps distorted by the previous Forestry Commission culls on the Grudie Woodland. RW stressed that it was important that everyone considered their own circumstances and ensured that their culls reflected actuality on their own estates.

RW also suggested that in considering the hind cull, members might want to look at the figures produced by the model, which on first work through suggested that, as a whole, if the population were to be stabilised, the group would have to cull 150% of their five year average. This would mean that the group would need to cull 517 hinds. The other approach was to consider recruitment, and if the group culled half of recruitment, that would mean they would be looking to take 659 hinds. A third way of looking at it was simply to take a percentage of, say, 16% of the hind population and this would produce a cull figure of 753 for the group. In terms of discussing the figures with the group, it had been decided to come forward with a figure roughly equivalent to half of the recruitment; namely, 659 hinds. Similarly, he suggested that if each member was considering stag culls, they should look carefully at the stag numbers on their ground/

ground and perhaps aim to cull 15%-16% of the stag population. If the model suggested something different from this, caution was needed to ensure that there wasn't over/under shooting.

#### 5.1.8 Deer Welfare

RW updated the group, advising that limited information had been collected on larder data and a query was raised with SC of NatureScot as to how one might best use this information to provide some indication of deer welfare. SC confirmed that there was no hard and fast rule on the approach, but there were a wide range of factors that could be taken into account. However, RW advised that there was a limited amount of information available and that we should start it off with a simple approach. It was hoped that SC could assist CC of Bowlts in coming up with something useful for the group.

SC/CC

### 5.2 Proposed Priorities for the Coming Year

The group agreed the priorities for the coming year as follows:-

- achieve the necessary hind cull to control the population;
- be mindful of the habitat monitoring coming up so that the earlier good work could all be followed up.

### 5.3 Funding

It was agreed that there was no particular funding available to the group for any of the initiatives, other than the members taking advantage of the Peat Wetland Scheme and forestry grants where available.

## 6. POACHING

No poaching issues were raised at the meeting.

## 7. ASSOCIATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT GROUPS (ADMG)

RC as Chairman of the ADMG gave an update from their perspective. Firstly, he commended the good spirit of cooperation being shown within the WRDMG which he indicated was good to see.

On the big political picture, the NatureScot report last year was cautiously helpful. The Deer Working Group Report was huge and exhaustive, a lot of good in it, some of it suggesting that NatureScot need to use their time more effectively.

It/

It was hoped to hear which view the Scottish Government favour, that of NatureScot or the Deer Working Group. RC suggested it wouldn't take much to sway the Scottish Government one way or the other. The argument for the voluntary principle is finely balanced.

As far as the ADMG was concerned, the AGM proposed for 18<sup>th</sup> March was cancelled due to Covid-19 but a Zoom meeting was held in July. This was not considered as successful as face to face. A newsletter was issued in March. The ADMG had tried to help with operations re: Covid-19 and had carried out a survey of the likely cost of no stalking due to Covid-19 which was estimated at around £9 million. Another survey considering the impact of Covid-19 to accommodation lets, etc, indicated that the cost was hugely significant. RC confirmed that the ADMG had written to the Scottish Government to indicate the plight of the industry five times during the crisis.

The ADMG had met with venison dealers pre-season, the suggestion being that if they survived the stag season, they could perhaps make it through the winter.

However, RC suggested that it was not all bad news, with demand for retail venison up 9%. However, he stressed that local markets in times of crisis were important.

RC advised that there had been one meeting with Forestry & Land Scotland and another with NatureScot. Perhaps the ADMG had not been as visible as they would have wanted to be, but a lot was going on in the background.

RW thanked RC for all the work he and his colleagues within the ADMG do to help the industry and for attending the meeting and giving the ADMG's report.

## 8. **NATURESCOT REPORT**

SC congratulated RW and the whole West Ross team for developing their DMP and working through the deer population model. He confirmed that NatureScot noted all that had been included within the Deer Working Group report and also acknowledged the contribution of the voluntary sector. His suggestion was that the best line was to keep work up on the habitat impact assessment, population management, peat wetlands, etc.

Looking forward, SC commented that with the Deer Working Group report, some issues can be picked up, some require consultation and some would need legislation, and it would be important to keep an eye on this.

Lastly, SC confirmed agreement with the group's focus on control of the deer population and asked that everyone give the group their full support on this initiative.

9./

## 9. **ELECTION OF OFFICE BEARERS**

Both RW and KSB agreed to step down to allow the election of office bearers but were re-elected unopposed, in both cases proposed by HvB of Foich and seconded by BM of Letterewe.

## 10. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Tom Cameron (TC) of Forestry & Land Scotland mentioned the issue of feral pigs in woods. He advised that they were trialling corrall traps, indicating that numbers of feral pigs were unknown but that they were increasing. This was confirmed by SC of NatureScot, who indicated that the spread of feral pigs was an increasing concern. SC advised that they came in various versions, some like wild boar, some spotted. They were in the Strathpeffer/Garve area and generally the Scottish Government's message is that if they are on your ground, it is your job to control them. He confirmed that there was trialling going on with drop netting, the suggestion being that rather than just shoot as they appear, it is better to make a plan and catch them.

RW suggested that the group keep an eye on this and suggested that there would probably require to be further discussion at future meetings.

## 11. **DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

It was agreed that the next meeting of the group would be held in March/April 2021 and RW/KSB would be in touch in due course.

RW/  
KSB

In drawing the meeting to a close, RW thanked all of the group members involved in the interim management meetings for their help. He also thanked everyone for the vigorous discussions on the population model and looked forward to seeing the results in the coming cull figures.