

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
HELD AT ACHNASHEEN HALL AND VIA TEAMS
WEDNESDAY 5TH APRIL 2023**

Present:	Stuart Allison Ruari Matheson Norman Kelman Craig McIntosh Aidan Bell Barbara MacDonald Friso Westheim Marc Westheim Glyn Robson John Wood Gary Ross Kenny Ross Edgar Seligman David Bennett	Eilean Darach Fannich Heights of Kinlochewe Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Letterewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochrosque, etc Strathbran Strathbran
Via Teams:	Donald Rice Maurits van Dedem Mark Lorimer	Dundonnell Fannich Inverbroom
In Attendance:	Linzi Seivwright Caroline Cook Ben McKeown	Chair Bowlts Chartered Surveyors NatureScot
Apologies:	Alasdair MacDonald Angus Davidson Donald Fraser Jake Buckthorp Gary Ross Derick MacAskill Andrew Oliver	Dundonnell Fannich Fannich Foich Gruinard FLS Letterewe

1. **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIR**

Action

The chair, Linzi Seivwright (LS) opened the meeting by offering her condolences to the Wilson family following the death of Pat Wilson earlier in the year.

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2. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD 30th NOVEMBER 2022**

2.1 **Adoption**

The meeting adopted the Minutes as an accurate record of the previous meeting. This was proposed by Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe and seconded by Edgar Seligman (ES) of Strathbran.

2.2 **Matters Arising**

LS queried whether Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts had received information on additional woodlands from Lochluichart. She thought she had but confirmed that she would check.

CC

Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart reported that they would be doing a new scheme at Allt Dearg and that information on that would be sent in due course.

GR

It was noted that any other matters arising would be picked up as we go through the meeting.

3. **PRIORITY ACTIONS ARISING FROM DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

3.1 **Designated Sites**

LS confirmed that we are no longer part of the Section 7 Agreement and as agreed at the last meeting, it was “business as usual”. Habitats would be assessed in the next couple of years and it was important that good work was maintained throughout this time.

Ben McKeown (BMcK) of NatureScot confirmed that the status would be assessed in 2024/25, following further habitat assessments.

Donald Rice (DR) of Dundonnell raised the point that there were going to be new National Parks in Scotland and asked if West Ross was included in the list. BMcK commented that no one was imposing National Parks on any areas and it would depend on local will. LS commented that there was a consultation called “30 by 30” whereby there was a commitment to bring 30% of land to protected area status by 2030. Currently about 17% of land is designated.

3.2 **Existing Woodlands**

Noted that the woodland methodology is currently being signed off, it is not quite there but training courses would be available and one was coming up at Beinn/

Beinn Eighe. LS confirmed that she would circulate the dates for this in due course.

LS

3.3 **New Woodlands**

LS noted that there was a general priority to increase woodland coverage and bring woodlands into good order. The Deer Management Plan update was an opportunity for the group to bring any new schemes to the table. There were no other schemes in planning at the moment, however GR of Lochluichart said that they were doing some compensatory planting within Lochluichart for the wind farm, but it was going to be within an open area in an existing woodland.

3.4 **Carbon Sensitive Habitats**

It was noted that there is a Government drive to get peatlands into good condition. Owners could identify areas and money was available for this type of work. It was useful for the group to see who is doing schemes and where and so any information on schemes should be forwarded to CC. Although group members were working individually, it was useful to have a more group wide view.

All

LS noted that that ADMG were running workshops and BMcK of NatureScot will have contacts for funding schemes. He suggested that owners should contact the Peatland Action Group directly.

Mark Lorimer (ML) of Inverbroom noted that they had done an overview report but was querying whether there was funding available from NatureScot for a more detailed report. BMcK of NatureScot commented that it would be worth him contacting Peatland Action directly.

Donald Rice (DR) of Dundonnell wanted to mention to NatureScot that the rules around regeneration distances around SSSIs were not conducive to regeneration. They have to plant areas around SSSIs rather than allowing the area to regenerate. This was mentioned in relation to Woodland Grant Schemes. LS commented that there was a consultation ongoing with Forest and Land Scotland (FLS) on grant schemes and if anyone has any experience on grants, then it would be good to get feedback from them. She would circulate the details and thought that the consultation ended in May. FLS were in the process of designing new grant schemes and were interested in feedback on them.

3.5/

3.5 **Habitat Impact Assessments**

CC updated the group, confirming that she had most of the data back in relation to the last round of habitat monitoring, but had some queries with regard to some of the data from Angus Davidson and so once she had full information, she could send out the draft results.

CC

BMcK of NatureScot noted that he would be interested to see the results.

3.6 **Public Access**

There was a general feeling that it seems like there is ever increasing pressure on areas due to increased public access, with members of the public lighting fires, fly tipping and leaving camp sites littered with rubbish. BMcK of NatureScot commented that if it is not responsible access, they shouldn't have access, however it was noted that this was impossible to enforce.

It was noted that the Heading for the Hills website no longer seemed to be used by walkers and that there were less and less people phoning the estates to find out where stalking might be taking place. LS suggested that there was a website/app called Walk Highland and perhaps the group should contact the administrators of this to find out if information on stalking and responsible access could be included.

There was also discussion about signage, which was generally ignored by members of the public.

Friso Westheim (FW) of Letterewe said that in New Zealand they have an app which is available through all tourist information sites, clothing shops and car hire outlets and that the information on public access is fantastic.

BMcK of NatureScot reiterated that the Walk Highlands website was worth contacting to find out if they could put information on there with regard to stalking and access, also perhaps amending the routes so that they start and finish in sensible places. He also suggested that it may be worth inviting the Highland Council Access Officer to the meeting. LS suggested that they should capture comments and feed them to the Highland Council and the National Access Forum. LS and BMcK of NatureScot also made the comment that it was the same across the whole country, it wasn't particular only to the West Ross area. In addition to the Highland Council Access Officer, BMcK suggested that perhaps we make representation to the National Access Forum and to the North West Biosphere and he would pass on contact details for them.

BMcK

DR/

DR of Dundonnell commented that there has been an increase in canyoning on Dundonnell and the area was starting to appear on canyoning websites as a good place to go, but there didn't seem to be a code of conduct for this.

3.7 **Deer Population and Population Model**

Given that there was no access to the screen, CC commented that the population model had been updated to include the latest cull figures and that these cull figures had been circulated. The general feeling was that it had been a reasonable year and that the winter hadn't been too harsh. LS asked the group whether they normally carried out a recruitment count and it was noted that the count is normally carried out in May.

LS also reported on the cost of a helicopter count, giving a ballpark cost of around £70,000. She confirmed that if the group were willing to fund 50% of this, then it would be looked at favourably by NatureScot and the count would be moved up the list. NatureScot would provide staff and analysis of the count and so she needed to find out from members if there was an appetite to do this at a cost of 50% contribution, and if so, what the timing of this should be. There was then a general discussion about the cost split and the timings and this would still have to be bottomed out. It was noted that the cost is usually calculated on a time basis and they can usually tell when the helicopter has moved from one estate to the other and each estate would be charged depending on how much time the helicopter spent on their ground. Some members felt that a winter count would be better, to be consistent, however LS commented that this could be taken into account within the population model. It was noted that Letterewe always carry out their count in August.

There was then a general discussion about other methods of counting, for example using satellite and drones, and LS commented that NatureScot had been looking at different counting methods, but currently helicopter provided the best results. NatureScot are pushing different methods of counting as their helicopter counts contribute a considerable amount to their carbon budget.

ML of Inverbroom didn't feel that the ends justified the means and felt that we shouldn't be using helicopters. LS asked if the group had done foot counts and the response was that some do and some don't.

3.7 **Deer Welfare**

It was felt that the herd was in generally good condition and there was nothing untoward in relation to mortality.

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4. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN REFRESH UPDATE**

LS noted that there was less input these days from NatureScot and it was up to the group to continue with keeping their Plan up to date, and on that basis, LS and CC would bring forward a proposal to refresh the existing Plan based on new count information.

LS/CC

5. **ADMG UPDATE**

LS circulated the spring update and would forward it on to anyone not there. She noted that the AGM in March was well attended, with information from NatureScot with regard to their programme of work. The headline message coming from them was that they were supportive of the group's good work and not to lose momentum. There were also two interesting talks, one from the Russ Jobson from the Tweed Forum with regard to riparian woodland and the impact of climate change on fish stocks. The second was from Rory Waugh from Ardgay Game about the challenges facing game dealers. This included flooding of the market at particular times of the year and how the distribution of game has become more difficult following Brexit. He was encouraging estates to forward plan and perhaps take some of their culls earlier in the season to spread the venison across the market.

LS reported on a project she had done with the Assynt Group with regard to venison, which proved popular within the local community. GR of Lochluichart also mentioned that they have a processing unit and process small amounts for the local community and there is always good uptake on this.

LS will circulate any information with regard to workshops and meetings in relation to ADMG and she also commented that there would be a trip to Glenfeshie to review the condition of the habitat there.

LS

LS commented that ADMG are in constant discussion with the Minister and the Strategic Deer Board on all deer matters.

6. **NATURESCOT UPDATE**

BMcK of NatureScot noted that they are keen to encourage groups to maintain momentum with regard to Deer Management Plans. He went on to say that the targets in relation to NatureScot are low herbivore impact, woodlands in favourable condition and woodlands on open range being able to regenerate without fences.

LS/

LS also commented that they had put to the Strategic Deer Board that there were other herbivores in play in a lot of these areas and they should be taken into consideration, for example sheep.

There was a general discussion about regeneration and the impact of other herbivores and also habitat changes in relation to climate change.

7. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Kenny Ross (KR) of Lochrosque raised the issue of copper bullets again, noting there was no alternative and he was finding that it was difficult to get lead bullets. NK of Heights of Kinlochewe commented that there was huge variation between bullets and LS added that the outcome depends on calibre and weight and that NatureScot were testing various bullets.

8. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was agreed that we should get this in the diary as soon as possible and LS and CC will circulate the date in due course.

LS/CC