

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
HELD AT THE ACHNASHEEN HALL AND ALSO VIA TEAMS
ON WEDNESDAY 19th JULY 2023 at 10.30 AM**

Present:	Linzi Seivwright Alasdair MacDonald Angus Davidson Donald Fraser Gary Ross Mark Lorimer Jamie Coles Donald MacLeod Barbara MacDonald Andrew Oliver Archie Howells Gary Ross Kenny Ross Edgar Seligman David Bennett	Chair Dundonnell Fannich Fannich Gruinard Inverbroom Inverbroom Kinlochewe Letterewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochluichart Lochrosque Strathbran Strathbran
In Attendance:	Caroline Cook Tom Turnbull Graeme Taylor Mandy McWilliam	Secretary/Treasurer ADMG NatureScot Bowlts Chartered Surveyors
Apologies:	Ruari Matheson Jake Buckthorp Craig McIntosh Aidan Bell Friso Westheim Paul Swann Glyn Robson John Wood Patrick Creasey	Fannich Foich Inverbroom Inverewe Letterewe Letterewe Lochluichart Lochluichart Strathvaich

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

Action

The Chair, Linzi Seivwright (LS), welcomed everyone to the AGM. In particular, she thanked Tom Turnbull (TT) from the ADMG for coming along.

2. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 27th JULY 2022**

2.1 **Adoption**

The meeting adopted the Minutes as an accurate record of the previous AGM, this being proposed by Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe and seconded by Kenny Ross (KR) of Lochrosque.

2.2 **Matters Arising**

LS confirmed that we will be going through most of the items as we go through the meeting, although she did mention the issue of deer on the peninsula. BM confirmed that there is a community meeting being held on 2nd August to discuss this issue further. LS queried whether the group should attend, and BM didn't see why not. LS asked Graeme Taylor (GT) of NatureScot whether this had come onto his radar. GT said that Andrew McMaster will attend the meeting in Ben McKeown's place. He said there has been increased culling in the area, but there are still concerns.

3. **DRAFT FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 30th SEPTEMBER 2022**

CC tabled the income and expenditure account for the year to 30th September 2022 and budgets for the years to 30th September 2023 and 2024 which had been previously circulated. The income and expenditure account was approved by BM of Letterewe and seconded by Andrew Oliver (AO) of Letterewe.

4. **BUDGET FOR THE YEARS TO 30th SEPTEMBER 2023 AND 2024**

4.1 **Budget**

CC confirmed that the draft budget for year to 30th September 2024 included an amount to refresh the DMP, depending on whether we go ahead with the helicopter count. If we don't go ahead with this work, then obviously the amount would not be charged, and would simply be carried forward.

Edgar Seligman (ES) from Strathbran talked about the biggest difference being LS' fee plus the Deer Management Plan (DMP) cost. He asked if the DMP cost was a one off. CC confirmed that in terms of historic costs for the DMP, the biggest cost had been in the beginning, and then the group had paid £5,400 for a refresh in 2019. Now it is a case of updating the Plan once again, and so we expect that it will be a one-off cost.

In terms of her own charges, LS confirmed that she hadn't claimed for her first year, and the extra cost for her this year is to cover any additional work involved in updating the DMP.

The budget was approved by Mark Lorimer (ML) of Inverbroom and seconded by BM of Letterewe.

4.2 **Members Subscriptions**

CC tabled the list of proposed subscriptions, which had previously been circulated. She noted that we used to base these on the number of stags, whereas, as agreed last year, we now we take an average of the number of stags, /

stags, hinds and calves and area. The list of proposed subscriptions was approved by Angus Davidson (AD) of Fannich and seconded by ES of Strathbran.

5. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

5.1 **Review of Actions Arising from the DMP**

LS drew attention to the Schedule of Actions from the group's DMP which had been circulated with the meeting papers. She went through the various actions as follows:-

5.1.1 Designated Sites

LS asked GT of NatureScot whether there was anything we need to know in terms of An Teallach. GT advised that he wasn't up to speed on this, but he commented that an HIA for Ardlair Letterewe SSSI had been carried out by contractors and the report has been submitted to BM at Letterewe. He said there is work to be done, but he is happy that together with the estate they will come to a reasonable conclusion. Once they have a final draft, they will circulate it to the group and will also include some proposals. BM said that at the moment they are arranging meetings with NatureScot to discuss the draft. LS asked for an update on An Teallach at the next meeting.

GT

5.1.2 Retaining Existing Native Woodland Cover

LS talked about arranging training for woodland monitoring. She suggested it is advisable to know what is going on in the woodlands. She suggested that this might be an action that comes from the refreshing of the plan.

5.1.3 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

Again, LS suggested that we can see where we are with this when refreshing the DMP.

5.1.4 Habitat Monitoring

One of the actions agreed had been to circulate the impact of the latest round of habitat monitoring. CC confirmed that she has copies of the maps with her which people can take away, but they hadn't been circulated yet as they have just been completed. These will now be circulated by email.

CC

5.1.5/

5.1.5 Deer Population and Population Model

The meeting went on to discuss the population model. CC shared the latest copy on the screen. She took the meeting through the model, reminding everyone how it works. The model is based on a sporting stag level of 400. If the ratio of stags to hinds is set at 1:1.25, this would give a population of around 7,700-8,000 deer, giving a density of about 7.3. The group had agreed previously to keep on top of the hind cull, the last five years the average has been 464, but the aim is to get it nearer to 700. She confirmed that the hind cull figures had been good this past year, but we need to keep that up. CC reminded everyone that at the end of the day, this is a model, the figures aren't exact, and it is based on where we think the figures might be depending on recruitment, mortality etc.

CC advised that she and LS have also been looking population model scenarios – i.e. if the 2018 count figures were adjusted, or if recruitment was higher what would the impact be. LS said that sometimes helicopter count figures can come as a surprise to the estates. She also confirmed that we are within the recommended targets.

LS said that as we are about to refresh the plan, it would be useful for the estates to feed back to CC what their objectives are and what number of deer they would like to see on the ground. She said that we could then bring these together and see what they look like. This is a good point to regroup and look at where we want to be in the next five years, a chance to take stock. We need to finetune our numbers to what we need and no more, to avoid any unnecessary scrutiny. It is prudent to demonstrate that we are managing the population as effectively as possible.

LS also suggested this is an ideal time to do a count. She has circulated potential costs to the owners and is looking for feedback. GT from NatureScot confirmed that they are happy to fund 50% of the costs, although their costings aren't the same as LS got from PDG and the costs from PDG were likely to be an under-estimate. GT said that on NatureScot's part, any money spent over £150,000 must go to Scottish Government and they are at £250,000. Therefore, they have the money, but are waiting for approval to spend it. He also said that they have a few large counts to do, including North Ross, who in front of us in the queue, so there are variables in terms of delivering the count programme. He therefore must be cautious in what he says, but confirmed we are on the list for this year.

LS/

LS noted that the estimate figure she had been given for the count from NatureScot was £70,000 plus VAT, which NatureScot would pay half of. GT suggested that PDG will say they will do it for less, but experience tells them it will be more expensive than they suggest. LS confirmed that the figures circulated to the owners were based on one half of £70,000 plus VAT. At the moment, the split has been worked out on an area basis, but the actual costs are calculated by the time spent on each estate, and so our figures are simply a ballpark, and they may change depending on the time spent by the helicopter. LS confirmed that what we are really looking for is a total count figure for the group and it may not reflect what individual estates feel are the figures on their estate. It is a snapshot for the group as a whole.

LS confirmed that we have had responses from three owners, who have said they are happy. She suggested we give the other owners a bit more time to come back to us, then we will go back to NatureScot.

All

ML of Inverbroom suggested his dislike of helicopters is well known. LS asked if there was an alternative for the group if we decide not to count, ML agreed that this is a question that we should look to address. ES of Strathbran suggested an in person count on the ground in a certain week. KR of Lochrosque said that this is impossible, we can't get the bodies. BM of Letterewe agreed that logistically for them, this wouldn't work. KR felt that the helicopter is the only way. BM agreed. Gary Ross (GR) of Lochluichart confirmed that they are happy to go ahead with the helicopter count.

ML said that he will think about it and come back. He felt it is unfortunate that NatureScot encourage us to do helicopter counts, which he thinks are unnecessary. He doesn't object to a count in principle, and if there is no alternative, then he will probably go along with it, although he would like us to see if there is any alternative. GT agreed that it is troubling that we are doing all this work to cut down on carbon, but are still using helicopters. He said that they are trialling using aerial photographs, drones and satellites, as ways in which they can retire the helicopters for good. They have had some success, but nothing that is as accurate as helicopters. ML asked if we could hear formally from NatureScot on what the alternatives are. GT agreed he would let us have an email.

GT

Tom Turnbull (TT) of ADMG asked if it was correct that drones cost eight times more. GT said that by the time it took to deliver the work and assess the photography using AI, it was more expensive in terms of staff time and contractor costs. He also talked about the satellites/

satellites not giving us the info we require. They are continuing to work on fixed wing drones and are hopeful that that might be more economical and provide more accurate results. However, from their experience, he confirmed that helicopters are still the most accurate.

AD of Fannich asked GT if the 500m line of sight is possible for drones. GT confirmed that the Civil Aviation Authority class drones as aircraft, and so that is the problem at the moment. ML felt that the Civil Aviation Authority should be put on the spot, and we should get an MP or two on side to put pressure on them.

To summarise, LS said that we will request that the owners come back to us regarding the count and circulate the outcome. In the meantime, we will continue with the population that we have.

LS then talked about what the estates are looking to cull in terms of stags this year. CC confirmed that this is based on the five-year figures, so the figures are pretty much the same as they are at present.

5.1.6 Deer Welfare

On deer welfare, LS confirmed that she sits on the Best Practice Steering Group for the ADMG. They are reviewing and refining the best practice guidance and she will keep the group informed on progress.

LS

GT of NatureScot talked about the intended redraft of the DMP and asked whether we would be asking them for input. He said they would be happy to provide this. LS thanked him for this. She suggested that CC put together a schedule of what will be happening in terms of the refresh and when.

CC

AD of Fannich talked about the Fannich Hills designated site. GT didn't have an update, although he knows monitoring is due at some stage. He said he could clarify this for the next meeting. CC noted that Ben McKeown of NatureScot had said at the last meeting that the status would be reassessed in 2024/25 following further habitat assessments.

5.2 Proposed Priorities for the Coming Year

LS noted that we have already talked about the count, and she is keen that we progress this as soon as possible.

5.3/

5.3 **Budgetary Implications**

LS confirmed that the count cost has not been included in next year's budget, this would be an additional cost. She suggested that if we do decide to go ahead, we will need to think about how we organise payment. The group isn't VAT registered, and so this will need to be considered, but first of all, she suggested that we get agreement to the count.

5.4 **Funding**

LS asked GT of NatureScot about SRDP collaborative funding for Moorland Management Plans and Deer Management Plans. GT said that the environmental aspects will be carried over into 2024 for Moorland Management Plans. AD of Fannich confirmed that this has been announced. Other than that, GT had no further updates.

6. **POACHING**

Nothing to report.

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

TT of ADMG thanked everyone for having him along to the meeting. He hasn't been to one of our meetings for a long time, and there is a lot going on politically. He said that ADMG have been liaising with the Scottish Government, NatureScot and others, and have now met three times with MSP Lorna Slater, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, who has the deer remit. They have discussed the importance of collaboration. They also met senior civil servants and took them out onto the hill. They have also been liaising with the Strategic Deer Board. He felt that there is no doubt that we are going to see increased regulation. He suggested that there have been very little incentives for deer management recently, and so it would be good to see more assistance in this regard. He felt that our plan for a helicopter count is a good idea.

TT explained that there is a lot of consultation going on at present, and ADMG represent their members as much as they can, although he suggested that at the moment, it does feel that things are up in the air.

TT talked about the Strategic Deer Board and Deer Working Group plans for secondary legislation to remove the close season for male deer. The ADMG have opposed this. He also talked about the proposal to see the introduction of image identifying sights to shoot deer under authorisation, which again they have opposed, although he noted that this is going forward. He also talked about the lowering of the/

the minimum bullet weight required to shoot deer with non-lead ammunition. ADMG had accepted this, but on the proviso that many of their members had reported welfare concerns.

TT confirmed that all three of these initiatives have been approved, but the ADMG and other rural organisations have been disappointed in the quick turnaround and the lack of scrutiny given by the Scottish Government.

TT then turned to venison, where prices aren't as good as we would have liked. He suggested that due to various reasons, including Covid and Brexit, the sector is under a considerable amount of pressure. He encouraged all to liaise in good time with game dealers. He confirmed that the ADMG are providing additional funding to the Scottish Venison Association this year, and it may be that next year they propose upping the subs, with the extra being ring fenced to provide assistance to the venison sector.

Alasdair MacDonald (AM) of Dundonnell suggested that if we are culling stags all year round, this will impact on the venison market. TT agreed, but said that there is no silver bullet, and they did push back against the extension of the season, although not purely on the venison issue. He agreed we need to provide as good quality a product as we can, and stags at the tail end aren't the best quality. AM said they are a seasonal product. TT agreed.

TT confirmed that the ADMG have a lot of projects on at the moment, and the main one they are focussing on is the Finding the Common Ground project, trying to reduce some of the arguments that we see in Deer Management Groups and on social media, trying to do some civic mediation. We are looking at ways to allow collaborative deer management, allowing respect for points of view from all sides.

On access, TT has setup a Deer Management Working Group within the National Access Forum to try and deal with access issues on the ground, which is more of an issue post-Covid. He encouraged everyone to update the Heading to the Scottish Hills website re: no of stalking days.

TT mentioned a panel discussion at Scone, discussing if there are reduced number of deer, what will it mean for sporting stalking. Should we be valuing it more. There had also had a trip to Glenfeshie to see what the big culls 20 years ago had achieved.

Donald Fraser (DF) of Fannich asked what the outcome at Glenfeshie was. TT said that they drove 1.5 hours across the estate and there was no chance of seeing a deer. He said that they have the intention to bring back sporting stalking at some point, but it will be a high-end experience, with perhaps only a stag a week.

LS/

LS said that we will keep everyone as up to date as we can as these initiatives progress and that feedback from the owners and stalkers will be key. She is also keen that in developing our DMP, perhaps in the spring we get out on the ground with everyone.

There was further discussion on the venison issue. Noted that DF of Fannich and AM of Dundonnell have had discussions about setting up a cooperative. TT talked about others setting up community processing plants. He said if we want help or advice on that, the Scottish Venison Association are the people to talk with. Agreed the demand is there, but the difficulty is sourcing it. LS felt that we should also be trying to make venison more affordable, and she agreed we should be exploring opportunities. BM of Letterewe talked about getting venison into schools, etc. LS confirmed that she is doing work on this in other areas, talking to community councils, nurseries, schools. TT felt that historically venison was seen as a premium meat, and we really need to be targeting the other end of the market. LS agreed we could start a project with local schools, and she is aware that AM already works with them. LS agreed to follow this up.

LS

ML of Inverbroom queried the 50,000 extra deer that the government want to have culled, and have the ADMG agreed to this. TT confirmed that this is across the whole of Scotland and is a figure that didn't come from the ADMG. GT of NatureScot confirmed that one of their staff members looked at the implications of this and confirmed that many of the deer issues aren't in the Highlands, but the southern areas and there is very little collaboration in the lowlands. He confirmed that NatureScot had come up with the figure of 50,000 deer for the next few years to get the numbers down. TT felt that in the Highlands the figures have plateaued since 2000, but there are parts of Scotland where numbers have increased, although definitely not in our area. BM also suggested that deer are moving and that increased access has had an impact. GT also talked about changes to agricultural practices having an impact. He agreed that even in the Highlands, deer are being seen in areas where they weren't 20 or 30 years ago, there is definitely more distribution of deer. ML feels that Highland estate owners are easy scapegoats, and if there is a need to reduce the population every year, he is hoping that will be fairly spread and the Highland estates won't be clobbered as they usually are. He suggested we need a comprehensive and fair data set from where they draw their information. TT agreed that he has been saying this for two years, suggesting we are unfairly putting targets on our backs by collaborating.

AM of Dundonnell asked if anyone in the south of Scotland submits deer returns. He doesn't think NatureScot have any idea what is shot down there. GT agreed that there are areas where there is certainly less reporting happening. He advised that part of the recommendations from the Deer Working Group is that there will be responsibility to provide deer returns and they will gather that information. He agreed there is a large proportion of deer being culled that they are not aware of. They are working on online returns system.

ML/

ML again suggested that he wasn't sure where the 50,000 came from, if they don't have the data, they must be making it up. GT agreed it is an estimate and there is definitely a fair bit of grey in there.

LS thanked TT for his input into the meeting.

8. **NATURESCOT**

GT of NatureScot began by clarifying that in terms of night vision thermal imaging, there will be a requirement for people to be authorised, and that they should be fit and competent. He said that use of thermal imaging is not suitable in some habitats and that there is no pressure to use this technology.

In terms of changes to seasons, he took on board AM of Dundonnell's point about shooting stags in Jan/Feb and putting it into the food chain. However, he suggested that just because there is the ability to do this, he doesn't think that people will.

On regulatory workstreams, they are looking at priority areas – national parks, specifically a new Section 7 at Caenlochan for delivering biodiversity gains. They delivered the first steering group meeting in June 2023 and are confident that the group can deliver the targets.

GT advised that NatureScot took action at Loch Choire recently and culled about 160 deer, and they are now moving towards a longer-term solution there, with the owner being offered a Section 7 Agreement. He felt that the ADMG had been quite happy with that intervention, noting that the owner hadn't had any staff on the ground for two years.

NatureScot also involved in discussions on venison. He noted that Ardgay Game are increasing their venison prices in July. He doesn't think that Simpson Game have followed suit but thinks they will do. He talked about one of their team looking at historic red deer prices, showing that there had been a decline in prices paid over the years. He also talked about their initiatives in terms of venison sales, which are going well.

AM of Dundonnell again talked about what crofters or farmers would do with deer shot in December if they don't sell them. GT said you don't have to shoot them or sell them, but crofters and farmers have been able to take deer since 1947, so no change there.

LS thanked GT for the update.

9./

9. ELECTION OF OFFICE BEARERS

LS confirmed that both she and CC would be willing to step down if anyone else wanted to take on the roles of Chair and Secretary/Treasurer.

There were no volunteers, and BM of Letterewe nominated that LS and CC continue in their roles. This was seconded by KR of Lochrosque.

10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There were no items of other business.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

LS proposed the next meeting would be in November and suggested that we do an online meeting at that time of year. This was agreed. LS also suggested that the spring meeting would be held in person, and then we perhaps organise a site meeting afterwards. She will be looking for someone to volunteer to host this nearer the time.

LS closed the meeting, thanking everyone for their attendance. She also asked KR to pass on his thanks to his mum for, once again, providing such a lovely lunch.