

# West Sutherland Deer Management Group

## Annual General Meeting

held at The Ceilidh Place, Ullapool

on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2017

### MINUTES

Chairman – David Allison (DA), Reay Forest; Secretary – Kirsty MacLeod (KGM)

In Attendance:

Mark White (MW) (Glencassley)

Roddy Watt (RW) (Merkland)

Dr Jean Balfour (JB) (Scourie)

Alan Balfour (AB) (Scourie)

Gordon Robertson (GR) (Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp/Drumrunie)

Rebecca Macleod (RM) (Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp/Drumrunie)

John Venters (JV) (Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp/Drumrunie)

Fiona Saywell (FS) (Culag Community Woodland Trust – Little Assynt)

Henry Bulmer (HB) (Keanchulish)

Mark Mackenzie (MM) (Keanchulish)

Bruce Blackley (BB) (Benmore Assynt)

Craig Ross (CR) (Inchnadamph)

Don O'Driscoll (DOD) (John Muir Trust – Quinag)

Romany Garnett (RG) (John Muir Trust – Quinag)

Sue Agnew (SA) (SNH)

Holly Deary (HD) (SNH)

Victor Clements (VC) (West/Assynt Peninsula sub group DMP author)

#### 1. The Chairman opened the meeting

DA welcomed everyone to the meeting. There had been some progress in the area [Deer Management Plans] but still a bit behind versus elsewhere in the country. Of the four sub-groups, some in place, others in progress.

#### 2. Apologies:

Derick MacAskill, Megan Breganzi (Forest Enterprise)

James Vestey (Benmore Assynt)

Jim Payne (Ardvar)

Michael Ross (Ardvar)

David Davies (Inverpolly)

Claire Acheson (CKD Galbraith – Eisg Brachaidh, Inver & Kirkaig)

George Vestey (Inchnadamph)

Tom Chetwynd (Invercassley)

Robbie Galloway (Duchally)

Ray Mackay (Assynt Crofters' Trust – North Assynt Estate)

Mike Daniels (John Muir Trust)

Iain Thomson (Sallachy)

#### 3. Election of Office Bearers (change to order of Agenda)

David Allison stood down as Chair. Dr Balfour (JB) took over the meeting, and proposed Gordon Robertson (GR) as the new chair, and David Allison as Vice Chair. David Davies had indicated his willingness to step down as Vice Chair. The proposal was seconded by FS and DOD.

JB asked for the members appreciation to be recorded. GR thanked DA on behalf of the members, and was thankful that he had agreed to be Vice Chair. KGM to arrange change of bank mandate.

**4. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016**

The minutes were agreed (proposed by DA seconded by GR).

**5. Matters Arising from the minutes of the last meeting:**

GR brought up the issue of deer in Lochinver. There had been an article in the Assynt News suggesting that people were shooting deer on the football pitch. This was quite unfounded and GR was in communication with the Editor about printing a correction. CR confirmed that he had been called in to cull an injured stag on the shore. There is a new keeper for Inver & Kirkaig, David McDonnell. KGM confirmed that he had been invited to the meeting though it was short notice, and he is now on the circulation list.

KGM confirmed that contact had been made with PC Daniel Sutherland, the Wildlife Crime Liaison Officer, based in Dingwall. A list of contact details for member estates had been emailed to him. A copy of the email correspondence is circulated with the minutes. [Daniel had been invited to the meeting but was in Greece on annual leave so not able to attend].

All other items per Agenda.

**6. Estate Reports**

Cull Statistics for the Group were circulated. An updated copy is circulated with the minutes.

Glencanisp/Drumrunie – JV reported 69 hinds short on Glencanisp, and 3 calves. Drumrunie 12 hinds and 9 calves. Not in great condition, little fat around the kidneys. Looking into ways to improve condition through planting/culling/habitat management.

Keanchulish – MM reported a severe lack of hinds. Only one shot, as it was within the plantation. Stag numbers were OK, and the hinds that were present were in good condition. Possibly due to land on the shore with good feeding.

Glencassley – MW reported 40 hinds shot. Deer in good condition, and plenty of calves last year. Recruitment should be good.

Inchnadamph – CR reported 47 hinds shot, three short of target 50. Good condition, struggled to find poor animals to shoot. Recruitment count to be carried out when doing foxes.

Benmore Assynt – BB reported hind cull 3 short of target. Good condition, late calves. Fewer deer seen, possible due to wind. This was his first season, and it was a good one.

Merkland – RW 30 hinds shot. Deer in fantastic condition. Lots of calves.

Quinag – DOD reported 64 hinds shot, and 24 calves. Good generally. Foetuses more males than females.

Little Assynt – FS reported 4 stags shot (OSL for woodland area), 6 hinds and 4 calves. Also 1 Sika stag, 1 Roe buck and 3 does.

Reay Forest – DA reported 183 hinds and 96 calves. Exceptional quality, difficult to choose animals to cull. Counted NWSDMG area over 3 days with 10 people, 40% recruitment.

Scourie – JB said they were struggling with Roe at Loch A Bhualin, taking advice on this. Continuing pressure re. red deer due to the fence.

North Assynt – RM reported 60 stags shot, part of big reduction cull required by SNH. Good condition. May not manage hinds target, talking to SNH about this.

No further estate reports, due to unusually low turnout at meeting.

GR mentioned the increasing numbers of Sika, and asked if they were considered a pest. MW said they were a resource at Glencassley.

**7. Sub Group Reports – Deer Management Plans**

KGM confirmed that North and East sub group DMPS were live and on the website. West (Assynt Peninsula) at consultation stage, with a separate page of downloadable documents on the website.

**Lochinver South**

**(Glencanisp, Drumrunie, Inver & Kirkaig, Eisg Brachaidh, Inverpolly, Keanchulish, Benmore Coigach)**

No DMP from South sub group yet. HD reported that SNH have paid part of the grant, remainder is only payable on receipt of an agreed and finalised plan. The difficulty from SNH's perspective is, therefore, about whether they are able to honour the remainder of this grant in terms of carrying it forward from last into this financial year. SNH continue to need to see that being developed.

GR said he would make it his business to chase up.

ACTION GR

[There was no one present to report on the Sub Group. At the last meeting BOH reported that half the work had been done in May 2016 but there was no progress report since]

**West (Assynt Peninsula)**

**(Ardvar, North Assynt, Quinag, Little Assynt, Middle Inver, Loch Assynt Lodge, Kylesku)**

VC had been recruited to prepare the DMP. He reported that he had looked at the history of the area, and now had something that all the estates could hopefully buy into. The helicopter count last year suggested there were ebbs and flows between areas. ACT feel that the SNH model is based on a high count and the cull target is unsustainable. There was consensus among group members, but not sure that SNH agrees. VC felt data from the past was flawed, but they now have decent background info. There had been a lot of comments back so over the next week or so he will sharpen up the draft and recirculate. There was optimism that something would be in place that members are happy with, but still to convince SNH.

HD confirmed that the SNH Board were reviewing that. The draft DMP was a phenomenal step forward, and SNH are keen to move on with this. There were however some sticking points, not least that SNH and the sub group were in fundamentally different places at present in respect of population modelling.

VC said that in some ways it was quite simple – trees and deer. It was disappointing that the absence of a Section 8 for Ardvar [Woodlands SSSI] in the recent Govt. report. He did not feel that the Ardvar Woodlands merited that level of interest.

HD said that she can only report to the Board, and it was the Board's decision on how to proceed. A lot of progress has been made, but population modelling is key.

DOD stated that he did not question the count data, but knew the group would and wished the figure had been a couple of hundred lower.

A five year average had been proposed, VC took this down to a three year average. Irrespective of the count, habitat impact was the issue.

HD had issues with averaging, re. transparency and modelling for cull targets going forward. Basing population modelling on historical figures is a problem, and SNH want to use the 2016 count data. Annual reviews will be necessary whatever.

SNH will be carrying out habitat [impact] assessments in Sept/Oct. VC had checked plots last month and saw very little evidence of browsing. The largest part of the woodland is on Ardvar estate, which is less impacted than the Quinag/ACT part.

DA asked if there was any merit in using the 2016 data and recounting in 2018. HD could not commit to SNH funding this.

On a positive note, a precedent had been set for meeting half way, and this will be further discussed at a meeting between SNH and the APSG (sub group). GR said a third party could step in to help find compromise. VC did not think a count would make much difference – he did not think that deer are there where the trees are vulnerable. Arvdar and Quinag met to discuss out of season licences (OSL) and agreed to do some limited out of season culling early summer. ACT was looking at possibly taking down fences on the [native woodland] plantations of the 1990s to try to draw deer away [from the Ardvar Woodland SSSI]. GR said he would keep a watchful eye and try to attend future meetings.

**East (Inchanadamph, Benmore Assynt, Glencassley, Sallachy, Invercassley/Duchally, Caplich, Glenrossal)**

KGM read out part of a written update from Iain Thomson. The 2016/17 cull target was reached. Habitat monitoring had been carried out in 2016 on Glencassley, Inchnadamph and Sallachy. Results showed low deer impacts on dwarf shrub heath and blanket bog areas. Results on other habitats still to be analysed. Monitoring will be carried out on Benmore, Duchally/Invercassley, Inchnadamph and Sallachy in 2017. It looked as though the stag, hind and calf cull will remain at the same level for 2017/18. Full report attached.

**North (Reay Forest, Scourie, Merkland)**

DA reported that HIAs were carried out on Merkland in 2016. Reay 2015 results were being analysed.

## **8. SNH Report**

HD referred to the recent [Rural Affairs] Committee Report, which had received quite a bit of media attention. Recommendations put forward, awaiting parliamentary debate as to priority actions going forward.

## **9. ADMG Report**

DA reported on the recent ADMG meeting. Chairman Richard Cooke had been disappointed at the report SNH put in to the [Rural Affairs] Committee, but said we must move on.

ADMG levy increase this year to £4.00 for stags, £2.00 for hinds and £1.00 for calves/other species (up from £3.00, £1.50 and £0.75).

DA said that some of the report was about what had not happened in this area, which was disappointing for him. The Scottish Government report reflects on those out there who aren't doing what they are being asked to do. It may be a time for change. With SNH funding cuts we must all work together. The Government cannot want to take over deer management.

ECAF (Environmental Co-operation Action Fund) has been withdrawn, to be relaunched this year.

SNH to concentrate on areas with no DMG.

Peatland Restoration Action Fund had £8m available. Funding support for management such as muirburn.

Rates – Assessors were swamped. Appealing decisions will lead to logjam. AB pointed out that charges could be made retrospectively once decision made. GR said that some had not received a notice yet.

Relationship with SNH is going to be vital going forward. HD confirmed that favoured option is collaborative action, but they do need to take action on non-compliance areas. GR offered to come to SNH Board. HD said the review tried to emphasise progress made, but it was a mixed picture in terms of delivery and made it difficult to put forward [the case for continued voluntary management]. GR said that the conclusion though was that it was not fit for purpose and SNH need to be tougher.

The take home message from the ADMG meeting was:

- 1) Those who have a plan need to address actions
- 2) For those who do not have a DMP, ADMG will set up action groups to help drive that forward.

VC had issue with the report stating that only 50% of DMPs were fit for purpose, with no quality assessment to say why. DA felt that each region had been dealt with differently. HD said WSDMG had got feedback thought the assessment process, and there was some statistical analysis on the assessment results. AB said that it was difficult to reach a standard when you do not know what that standard is. HD referred to the ADMG Benchmark, which is helpful. A template is not practical, however, as areas are all different.

DA said plans can be perfect but they need to be evolving or they become meaningless. Issue of sub groups versus whole DMG was brought up. The size of group helps in terms of pooled resources, training etc.

## **10. CALLP (Coigach-Assynt Living Landscapes Partnership)**

FS reported on the Sustainable Deer Management project. There were 10 people signed up for the DSC1 course to be held at Glencanis in May. There would possibly be a DSC2 and another DSC1 if enough people interested. Cost with 60% grant £120 pp.

Community engagement work in conjunction with Ullapool High School, "Hill to Grill" project. This had been successful and was covered by the P&J newspaper. Kids came out on the hill with DOD, RG, JV and the HC Ranger, camera stalking. Also butchery/larder covered. This was a pilot, which would hopefully be rolled out year to year. FS asked if any other estates would like to take part to get in touch.

## **11. Accounts**

Accounts for the year to date (31 March 2017) were circulated. Copy attached.

KGM noted that group finances were tight. ADMG levy going up, and that is directly recharged to estates, but we need to increase WSDMG levy going forward. This has been £1.20 per stag for some time. This covers Secretarial fee and sundry expenses, such as meeting room etc.

KGM had worked out cost to members for helicopter count in 2020. This would be £17 per stag per annum (based on 5 year average as per ADMG levy) for three years to cover £40,000 cost. Cost could be less depending on grant assistance, but realistically not less than half of that.

GR will review Secretarial fee. KGM was happy with current fee, and will not charge for mileage and printing costs for the time being.

## **12. AOCB**

VC felt that the WSDMG Constitution was quite weak in the area of voting arrangements, and suggested using the ADMG pro forma. He had suggested changes to relevant sections. KGM to send to members with the minutes for approval. ACTION KGM

DA brought up deer movement. He proposed sitting down with maps and coloured pens to look at movement between areas. Sub groups could get together ahead of the next meeting. VC felt this was vital, as it was the crux of the matter for the APSG. Meeting to be arranged as soon as possible, for end April/early May. HD to provide printed count map as previously promised (there had been issues with the matrix printer). ACTION GR/KGM/Sub Groups

## **13. Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will take place in November 2017. Potential dates will be circulated 2-3 months ahead. Future meetings next year to be held in June and November, with April proving difficult for attendance. ACTION KGM

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending.