

APSG meeting 23 May 2018-06-07

Present: Michael Ross, Jim Payne, Mark Turner, Andy Hibbert, Romany Garnett, Robbie MacKenzie (present after point 6 on agenda) , Holly Deary (SNH), Nick Halfhide (director of operations SNH), Mike Cantlay (chair SNH), Ray Mackay (chair), Don O'Driscoll (vice-chair), Jorine van Delft (secretary)

1. **Apologies:** Fiona Saywell, William Macleod

2. **Out of season culling update:**

Don O'Driscoll: 9 stags shot

Michael Ross: 1 stag shot

3. **Deer Density Assynt:**

Overall density for the Assynt Peninsula is 11.

JP: Is there any explanation for the number of deer on the Stoer peninsula?

RM: Not as far as I am aware, there are sheep and cattle there as well.

MR: Wonders if it's possibly weather related.

JP: Wonders if locals are shooting less.

MT: Where does the density figure of 13.5 come from?

HD: This density is the summer population in the model used as the basis for the proposed stag cull at this meeting

4. **Recruitment count feedback**

RM: ACT has not managed a recruitment count

MR: Ardvar attempted a recruitment count on three separate occasions but due to lack of deer on the ground it was not viable.

DO'D: JMT has not managed a recruitment count

- fewer calves sighted than expected.

HD: Same for some other areas due to length of bad weather.

AH: 3 outings 0 sightings of deer

RMK: Went out on Middle Inver and ACT land, on the same day, and counted 68 hinds & stags and 13 calves.

5. **Stag cull**

RM presented the following as possible cull targets for each estate –

ACT – 43

JMT/Quinag – 28

Ardvar – 18

Kylesku – 2

Brackloch/

Middle Inver – 4

Lagg – 5

Little Assynt – 5

Assynt Lodge – 6

Lochinver/

Vestey - 6

Oldany - 4

Total = 121

MR: Ardvar can't guarantee that they will make their cull number. Is also awaiting results of habitat so these can be taken into account.

AH: How were cull numbers reached?

RM: The number of animals estimated in the population model as agreed in the dmp is much lower than the figures obtained by the March helicopter count. It was therefore felt that the helicopter count figures offered a better basis for estimating cull numbers.

MR: Would have been good to have had numbers from a November count.

HD: The numbers that were taken from the partial November count showed a higher population of deer for the counted areas.

MR: Due to partial count there is no data to compare these numbers with the uncounted parts of the APSG. Might be due to deer seeking shelter on counted estates. Habitat report should shed light on overall impact of deer.

RM: It's hard to establish the actual number of deer on the Ardvar Estate since deer shelter on the estate when the weather is bad. The count was abandoned due to bad weather but the data came in high- open to interpretation.

AH: Cull number mentioned by VC of 84. Why 120 cull target?

RM: The 120 cull target takes account of the latest count data.

AH: Feels the difference between the 2 numbers, 84-120, is quite significant.

RM: ACT is willing to try to reach the cull target. They have been in a struggle with SNH and are willing to give some leeway subject to the herbivore impact assessment and the actual presence of deer on the ground. ACT has given Joe Land permission to shoot in the 2 plantations to reduce the number of stags present there. The plantation is unsuitable ground for stalking guests.

MT: Oldany is looking to shoot 5 stags

HD: It would be interesting, and important, to get a better picture of the movement of deer so it can be determined where they are when they can be controlled.

MT: It seems there is more an isolated view between dmg's at the moment rather than an overall view.

HD: The 2016 count was done with this overarching perspective of the area

RM: Surrounding deer management groups in this area are meeting to discuss deer movement. Victor's sense is that the recent cull figures should not be possible, given the figures from recent helicopter counts. His conclusion is that the deer were elsewhere during these counts - i.e. on the Assynt Peninsula.

HD: There is certainly some movement but not on scale that is being talked about. The discussion in the meeting tomorrow (between surrounding dmg chairs) is worthwhile to establish where and to what extent there is movement.

MT: Agreeing movement might not necessarily be useful.

HD: it is the time of year that damage is occurring and where the deer are when they are in season that is important

DO'D: There is consistent crossing of hinds at Skiag but not in significant numbers.

RM: There is a growing number of stags in the regenerated areas between Lochinver and

Clachtoll.

DO'D: Quinag may draw more stags from Inchnadamph if habitat improves. The density at Inchnadamph is 20, a significant difference.

HD: There is a difference in opinions regarding movement and it's not clear how significant it is in regards to deer numbers in the APSG.

Do'D: Not happy with proposed cull number.

RM: The figure of 28 comes from adding 20% to last season's figure of 23 (out of 100). This year the target is 120 so each estate's figure has gone up by 20%.

Do'D: Offer still stands for other properties to shoot on JMT land.

- depends on what you want to take out of the breeding stock

- depends on what you want to take to reach the density of 7

HD: Reducing the population over 4 years is more acceptable to APSG members, and the hind cull is most significant in relation to how quickly an overall reduction in population might occur.

DO'D: Hind count is labour intensive but would be useful, is willing to help other APSG members with this.

MT: Is aware of AH's previous objections to exceeded cull numbers so wants to make it clear that Oldany is looking to shoot 5 stags rather than 4.

RM: The group has always been very good in communicating the cull numbers between themselves and keeping a good picture of how many have been shot and how many still to go to make the target.

HD: Agrees this worked well last year.

RG: Is SNH doing the Habitat monitoring this year?

HD: Yes SNH has contracted out the habitat monitoring for the APSG for this year.

RM: HD do you have anything to add to the discussion of the cull target?

HD: Would be useful to know if the cull target has been agreed by all members of the APSG*

RM: People can agree try to achieve the cull number rather than commit to it.

AH: Not happy about the cull numbers, feels it will lead to deer eradication rather than deer management. Feels SNH is not recognising how their decisions are making it very hard for him to survive as an estate.

MT: Our dmp was written by VC not HD. HD is trying to find a way forward.

AH: Is VC a necessary addition to the status quo? Was his involvement determined by the group?

RM: This was a group decision and yes involving VC was necessary. Richard Cook commented that having the dmp drawn up by VC was a very sensible idea. SNH had not initially welcomed the plan as drawn up by VC but has met the APSG halfway.

MR: Feels the cull number for Ardvar is too high. He does not want to end up shooting the resident population. He will keep the group advised on how they will get on with the cull. If there are shootable stags on the estate he will shoot them.

RM: Will contact the members that are not present at this meeting: Tom Sharp, Robbie MacKenzie, Vestey Estate.

JvD: No objections to cull numbers stated for LAE

6. SNH Update/Holly Deary

For our information, there will be a re-assessment of all dmp's by SNH to provide feedback to the Scottish government. Assessment will be done on priority criteria, SNH will provide feedback to the groups so they can prepare. Assessment will take place to make sure that the action points

within the dmp's are being delivered on. The review is done at national scale and not necessarily at group level.

NH: Ministers want to see if the dmp's are delivering what they are put in place for and check if the deer management is on course.

RM: During the last round of assessments the APSG did not yet have a dmp in place, at that time we were ranked 3rd from the bottom. With our dmp in place we should end up in the middle. With VC's help we have moved in the right direction.

JP: Are we hoping to keep working with VC in future?

RM: We don't need to keep VC on as a group. He was hired by the APSG to write up the dmp last year and help with Ardvar. Unless something specific comes up there is no need to hire Victor. (For information, two letters written by RM & VC will be forthcoming in Am Bratach)

JP: Ardvar Estate will be keeping VC on as an advisor.

RM: Same for the ACT

MT: Will there be a helicopter count this year?

HD: There's a 5 year rolling program. There may be help with funding available if groups are able to co-fund counts and want to organise an interim helicopter count.

MT: Is it possible to use drones for deer counting?

HD: There is work being done to test drone use for deer counts but at the moment the distance needed to be observed between drone and operator is too close to make it a useful tool for deer counting.

MT: Is SNH going to re-classify the Acidic Oak woodlands at Ardvar seeing there is not much oak present?

NH: SNH is looking to research what reasons were behind the original classification and if it is indeed a sensible classification. They will be hiring a neutral party to take this on.

MR: Will SNH be informing us what the designation will be?

NH: No. Why this designation was made and if this designation is sensible will be re-evaluated by a neutral party. Not by SNH. It's not clear yet who will be doing this work.

MT: If there is a revision of the designation will SNH accept this and look forward?

NH: Yes, this will definitely be contemplated. SNH is nervous about the outcome of this evaluation since it is unsure what will happen if this thread gets unpicked. But they are willing to admit to past mistakes if mistakes have been made.

MT: Is this designation due to the European directives?

NH: The European directives have pin-pointed areas and provided a list of woodland areas. Designations have then be made following European directives.

RM: ACT found that not all data regarding the decisions regarding the designation of Ardvar is available.

MT: Has this data disappeared?

NH: During the digitization process not all data was digitized. There was not a lot of data on this process to begin with but in the process the resulting decisions have been kept but not much of the workings behind these decisions.

MT: Surely a new designation process is necessary if this data is no longer available.

NH: SNH recognises the communities concerns which is why this re-evaluation will take place.

DO'D: SNH does still have the qualifying criteria.

MT: How can a woodland be designated when there is no oak present?

NH: We can tell you why but our explanation has led to problems in the past (chicken flavoured

crisps analogy). In short, in an acidic oak woodland oak is expected as well as other plants. You may find woodlands that do not have a lot of oak but do have other plants present that fall under the heading acidic oak woodland. There are guidelines on this. Categorizations have huge variations within them.

MT: If there is lots of birch present shouldn't it be qualified as a birch woodland?

NH: Ardvar was originally classified as a birch woodland. This designation pre-dates the European designation. The area has characteristics of an oak woodland so has been qualified as such.

MT: Does the designation have an effect on what level of regeneration is expected?

NH: Yes, including the regeneration expected of other species of plants/trees.

MT: That means that the designation of the area as an acidic oak woodland has determined the conclusion that the woods are not showing enough regeneration and have been considered in unfavourable condition.

RM: Yes, changing the designation will change a lot of things at Ardvar including the deer cull numbers needed in this area.

RMK: What percentage of birch needs to be present for it to be called a birch wood?

- The categorisation/designation depends on the overall habit assessment.

HD: The terminology can be unhelpful but the cull planning is linked with the habitat assessment.

JP: Will SNH be willing to change the designation?

NH: The government would have to reconsider the designation.

The meeting then was handed over to Mike Cantlay, Chair, SNH.

(JvD – 9/6/18)

*Summary note > The situation at present regarding the 2018 stag cull is as follows :

ACT to attempt to cull 43

Ardvar 15 (1 shot already/OOS)

JMT/Quinag 28 (9 shot already/OOS)

Brackloch/

Middle Inver 4

Lagg – no response as yet to proposed target of 5

Little Assynt 5 (but possibly more because of fencing)

Assynt Lodge – not happy with proposed target of 6

Lochinver/Vestey 6 (and happy to cull more, if required)

Oldany 5

Total = 106

RM to liaise with estates throughout the season to see if any shortfall needs to be made up by others.

(RM – 13/6/18)