

# West Sutherland Deer Management Group

## Meeting via Zoom

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020 at 2pm

### MINUTES

#### Participating:

Alan Balfour (AB)	Chair/Scourie	Claire Belshaw (CB)	Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp & Drumrunie
David Allison (DA)	Reay Forest	Kenny MacLennan (KM)	Badentarbet
Mark White (MW)	Glencassley	Callum Paterson (CP)	Balnagown
Adrian Wayne (AW)	Eisg Brachaidh	Roddy Watt (RW)	Merkland
Robbie Galloway (RG)	Balnagown-Invercassley	Mark Foxwell (MF)	SWT – Benmore Coigach
Don O’Driscoll (DoD)	JMT – Quinag/Kylesku	David Davies (DD)	Inverpolly
Elaine MacAskill (EM)	CALLP		

#### In Attendance:

Kirsty MacLeod (KGM)	WSDMG Secretary	Holly Deary (HD)	SNH
Tom Turnbull (TT)	ADMG	Alistair Headley (AH)	Plantecol (consultant)

#### **1. Acting Chairman’s Welcome**

AB opened the meeting by thanking everyone for coming.

#### **2. Apologies:**

Iain Thomson	Sallachy	Andy Hibbert	Loch Assynt Lodge
Jorine Van Delft	CCWT - Little Assynt	Michael Ross	Ardvar
Fiona Saywell	CCWT / CALLP	John Snyder	Middle Inver
Bruce Blackley	Benmore Assynt	Derick MacAskill	Forestry & Land Scotland
Tom Sharp	Lagg	Claire Acheson (CA)	Galbraith – Inver & Kirkaig Eisg Brachaidh/
Mark Turner	Oldany		
Tom Chetwynd	ADMG	PC Daniel Sutherland	WPO
Phil Jones	Assynt Community Council		

#### **3. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

The minutes were agreed, other than a name spelling correction.

#### **4. Matters Arising from the minutes of the last meeting:**

Main action points of the last meeting: -

Item 1. Separate cull table showing actual against targets had been prepared by KGM

Item 2. Deer in Lochinver: TT said this was ongoing, liaising with ACC and have been trying to cull some of the stags that have been coming into Lochinver. Also looking at fencing repairs, Elaine MacAskill has been surveying that. At APSG meeting the previous evening, there was discussion about potentially issuing fliers locally on culling and importance of not feeding deer, subject to approval by NatureScot and WSDMG main group. KGM reported email received from Phil Jones ACC saying much the same and appreciated WSDMG efforts.

Item 3. HIA data to be mapped, still at collating stage. QGIS training to be refreshed for KGM, along with Jorine Van Delft (Assynt Peninsula sub grp). This project is to cover the whole area, not just the two sub groups that are within the CALLP area.

Item 4. Funding for AP and South sub group Secretaries AP and South, with support from CALLP. KGM confirmed this was progressing, may only do this for AP sub group this year.

Item 5. Sub Group levy to be revised in 2021 – agenda item

Item 6. CALLP leaflet promoting deer management and venison – KGM to contact Fiona Saywell

## 5. Stags Review 2020/21 Season

Inverpolly (DD): All guests had to be cancelled. Stags show 12, below target of 18. Not a lot of spare stags around. Good stags holding hinds, but few challengers so quite hard work to find suitable beasts. Hard to say if it is over-culling or more fencing leading to less immigration.

Merkland (RW): Shot 31 stags, in line with target, good condition. One of these was in the woodland scheme. Season was actually easier due to there being no large groups. Good weather.

Glencassley (MW): Shot 30, in line with target. Plenty of stags about. All guests were UK.

Benmore Coigach: Shot 27 red and 1 sika stag.

Glencanisp/Drumrunie (CB): Tenant shot half of the target, all good condition, but a dearth of clients so was struggling to do more than that.

AP Sub group (TT): Stag cull seems to have gone quite well. Encouraged people to stretch cull over longer period in case venison markets collapsed further. Group target 121 stags, shot 123, good condition.

Reay Forest (DA): Shot 114 vs 100 target, good condition. Intense rut. Good opportunity to shoot poor young stags, with fewer paying guests out.

Badentarbet (KM): Shot 6 stags, difficult to get them. What was shot was in good condition, but not many coming in.

Eisg Brachaidh (AW): Struggled at the start, people around seemed to be disturbing the deer. Shot 20 target, and 1 sika.

Invercassley (RG): Shot 30 target, slow at start but once rut got going (week 40), good selection of strong stags. Weights up not vs last year but the previous year.

KGM presented table showing actual vs. targets, which ties in with what people are reporting. This will be circulated post meeting along with other papers.

## 6. Deer Management Plans

### *Sub Group Progress Updates*

#### West (Assynt Peninsula)

TT reported following meeting previous evening that intention was to cull hinds in line with population model to bring density to 7 deer per km<sup>2</sup>. Discussions ongoing about deer in Lochinver, two meetings and a sub group meeting since last DMG meeting. Concern about how to keep tabs on what deer numbers are within the sub group area; interest expressed with NatureScot in remote/drone counting trials.

Some have undertaken habitat monitoring, and the results will be mapped as previously discussed.

Results of Ardvair Woodland HIA undertaken by SNH in 2018 seem to be giving for cautious optimism. 2020 survey delayed until next year. DMP Action Points being updated, then will be forwarded to be uploaded to the WSDMG website.

#### North

DA stated commitment to continue culling to delivering on population model and DMP target of 10 deer per km<sup>2</sup>. Targeted culling to reduce impacts in southern areas of Reay Forest, highlighted by HIA results in last two years, going for 195 hinds plus calves, hopefully venison market will hold out. RW planning 40-50 hinds at Merkland. AB reported higher than normal number of hinds shot at Scourie.

#### South

DD reported that things were somewhat up in the air due to Eisg Brachaidh fencing proposal. Victor Clements has been looking at the numbers, and this could have a large impact on the whole sub group area.

#### East

KGM read out report from Iain Thomson:

*Due to restrictions during stag season, 108 shot representing around 70% of planned figure of 155. Some estates managed to complete target, others will assess whether to increase target for next few years to make up for the shortfall after next year's habitat monitoring and mortality and recruitment figures are*

*analyses. 2020 HIA showed no difference from other years and the impact on dwarf shrub heath and blanket bog remains low. Willow springs habitat was monitored this year, results still being analysed. Hind cull 2020/21 will be 160, which is an increase of 20.*

HD reassured that hind cull is set to continue as planned.

DA mentioned that if the venison market collapsed, he would be considering making venison available to local community to purchase at low cost in order to achieve cull, and wanted to put that out to the group. Reay have facilities to do that. A license required to sell locally, not required to give it away, which would be better than disposing of it.

## **7. ADMG Update**

TT ran through notes from TC. Virtual AGM held on 16<sup>th</sup> July, key points were Covid having brought the ScotGov review of the deer sector to a stop. It hangs on the findings of two reports, the SNH review following the assessments in Spring 2019 which was largely favourable, and the Deer Working Group report, which in ADMG's view slightly fails to recognise what has been achieved in recent years and does not place enough importance on collaborative deer management. When the committee starts reviewing these reports, which will likely be delayed again, ADMG will be advising against further change.

Over recent months ScotGov has introduced a lot of business support measures, but very few available to land management businesses. ADMG has pointed out there is no logic for this exclusion.

Advice available in generic terms for tourism businesses, there is also advice on the Countrysports Scotland website.

Prior to Covid, Scottish Venison Association had undertaken market research; this has been put to one side for now. The price has dropped from £2.30 to around £1.00 per kg. SVA has been supported by ADMG in developing a recovery plan for the sector, and has applied for funding to help with marketing.

ADMG autumn meeting on Zoom 18<sup>th</sup> November at 10am, registration details circulated. A survey was undertaken on Covid impact, 34 members responded citing losses of £1.1m, suggesting significant losses across the sector, results have been sent to ScotGov ministers.

Eight new HIA training videos on ADMG website, which should be useful for those undertaking HIA in the spring. TT will forward link to KGM for circulation.

## **8. Accounts**

KGM presented P&L and balance sheet to June 2020.

Current position: reasonably healthy bank balance of £1600 net of some HIA funding still to be transferred to sub groups. This year's levy invoices to be sent out shortly. Net income for the group should be £2,300, which is to cover the Secretary fee and the DMG contribution to the two sub group secretaries' fees (with CALLP grant covering 60% this year). Proposal agreed by South sub group and AP sub group to have a slightly higher group levy for those members. AB asked if this amount included increased Secretary fee previously agreed, KGM confirmed it was not and it remained at £1000 (plus VAT), as now was perhaps not the best time to be increasing costs.

Group finances / levies to be reviewed in 2021, as agreed at May 2020 meeting.

## **9. NatureScot**

HD did not have much to add to TT's report, NatureScot encouraging people to keep in contact with game dealers. Importance of meeting hind cull targets despite challenges was re-emphasised, and it sounds as though WSDMG members were continuing, using HIA to help inform.

NatureScot continuing to work with DWG (ScotGov Deer Working Group), highlighting areas where developments are already in place to address recommendations, and to discuss those that needed work.

ScotGov funds towards trials on drone and satellite imagery, with NatureScot working with two companies through the winter with a view to reducing costs associated with helicopter counting, both financial and carbon. Methodology and results will be made available next spring. The costs will still be quite high; the company operating the drones which cost upwards of £0.5m have necessary licences etc.

HD was happy to update if anyone had questions.

## **10. A.O.C.B.**

CB was interested to hear that Reay Forest were aiming for 10 deer m<sup>2</sup> and wondered how they arrived at this figure. DA confirmed that was the case for the southern beats, target was lower in northern beats which fall into NWSDMG area. They have counted deer every two years for 13-14 years now, and gone

from 12 to 10 deer m<sup>2</sup>. Impacts still a bit high in some areas, so making small adjustments and will continue reviewing long term, informed by HIA, and working with others including River Laxford restoration with Atlantic Salmon Trust. Protected woodland area fenced off, higher culling efforts in those areas. CB asked what plans were longer term when fence fails, will it come down or be replaced. DA said plans were under review.

DA brought up the issue of a video which had been circulating online. ADMG statement issued saying that it did not appear to represent best practice. HD said NatureScot also aware and had received complaints. There had been some ill-informed commentary that NatureScot had been somehow been involved in this being circulated which was not the case.

#### 11. Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2021, via Zoom unless face to face meeting possible.

KGM will send cull tables etc. and a link to the Zoom recording by email after the meeting.

Meeting Closed at 2:55pm

[Note: DD and KM not present due to planned power outage in Coigach between 2.25 and 2:50pm]

MAIN ACTION POINTS		ACTION
1.	KGM to send cull tables and link to recording of meeting	KGM
2.	Continue to liaise with ACC re. deer in Lochinver	Assynt Peninsula/ South Sub Groups
3.	HIA data to be collated and mapped digitally - ongoing	KGM / JVD
5.	WSDMG group levy to be reviewed in 2021	WSDMG
6.	Contact CALLP regarding recognition of WSDMG's contribution in leaflet	KGM