

West Sutherland Deer Management Group

Meeting via Zoom

Wednesday 16th March 2022

MINUTES

Participating:

Alan Balfour (AB)	Chair - Scourie	Craig Ross (CR)	Inchnadamph
David Allison (DA)	Reay Forest	Iain Thomson (IT)	Sallachy
Robbie Galloway (RG)	Balnagown-Invercassley	David Davies (DD)	Inverpolly
Romany Garnett (RG)	JMT- Quinag	Mark White (MW)	Glencassley
Mark Turner (MT)	Oldany	Roddy Watt (RW)	Merkland
Michelle Henley (MH)	SWT – Benmore Coigach		

In Attendance:

Kirsty MacLeod (KGM)	WSDMG Secretary	Elaine MacAskill (EM)	Woodland Trust / EB
David Balharry (DH)	John Muir Trust	Tom Turnbull (TT)	ADMG
Holly Deary (HD)	NatureScot	Leonie Charlton	

1. **Chairman's Welcome**

AB opened the meeting.

2. **Apologies:**

James Vestey	Benmore Assynt	Bruce Blackley	Benmore Assynt
George Vestey	Inchnadamph	Derick MacAskill	Forestry & Land Scotland
Claire Belshaw	Assynt Foundation	Claire Acheson	Galbraith – Eisg Brachaidh
Margaret Payne	Ardvar	Tom Chetwynd (TC)	ADMG
Michael Ross	Ardvar	Claire Belshaw	Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp & Drumrunie
Calum Paterson	(Savills) Balnagown	Lewis MacAskill	
Marcus Munro	Ledmore Lodge	Jim Sloane	Kylesku
Andy Summers	HC Ranger	Fiona Saywell	(CCWT) Little Assynt
Phil Jones	Assynt Community Council	PC Daniel Sutherland	Wildlife Crime Officer

3. **Election of Office Bearers**

At the last meeting, AB was proposed to continue as Chair, with Iain Thomson as Vice Chair.

Since the last meeting in November, KM had agreed to continue as Secretary with the proviso that she would not be able to attend meetings between April and October. A stand in to take minutes should be possible for any meetings within that period.

4. **Minutes of the Meeting Held on 19th November 2021**

Proposed AB, seconded IT

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

Per agenda

6. **Hinds Review 2021/22 Season**

Glencassley (MW) – Hinds were fine. Shot 52 and 25 calves. Poorer at start but looking better towards the end. Should be reasonable calving rates.

Merkland (RW) – 52 hinds, 16 calves. Similar story.

Inverpolly (DD) – non stop gales was main problem, managed to reach target of 30 hinds. Generally in good condition, not too much cold weather.

Invercassley/Duchally (RG) – culled 22 hinds, 13 calves. Poor hinds were those not recovered from last winter, majority looking quite well. Started late, into December and January.

Inchnadamph (CR) – 50 hinds, 15 calves. Again poor at start and one or two at the end, majority looked well.

Oldany (MT) – reached target of 5 (not 4 as shown on table). Nothing else to report.

Reay Forest (DA) – shot 227 hinds, 106 calves. November very wet and windy, 500mm rain in Achfary in the month. This made access more difficult to some areas, so ended up shooting 70-80 of those hinds in the last week of the season which is not ideal. Stock remaining are in good fettle.

Sallachy (IT) – shot 11 hinds and 4 calves. Plan was not to, but saw a lot of hinds about during the stag season so will probably be doing the same going forward and this will be written into the Deer Management Plan. Hinds all in good condition, not such a bad winter.

Quinag (RG) – new contractor Michael Stokes shot 47 hinds and 18 calves. Hinds were in poor condition compared to other areas he works, and lower calving rates, but unsure if this was normal here. Majority of hinds shot were in calf. He also noted ammonia down back legs, and wasn't sure if this was normal or one off.

Benmore Coigach (MH) – awaiting breakdown of total 25 hinds and calves and condition. Update to follow.

Middle Inver (JS) – only 2 stags, covid reduced access in hind season and when did get out it was harder to find any, especially without calves.

Scourie (AB) – 5 hinds reported by crofters, not aware of condition

KM confirmed that virtually all cull figures had been received for the season.

As a general comment TT said the weather did play a part in delaying activity so had to catch up at the end of season. Mild weather meant deer were not being pushed down to accessible ground as normal, so more hours put in to achieve cull targets.

IT had asked for deer welfare and condition to be brought up, and this had been covered in the reports above.

7. Deer Management Plans

Sub Group Progress Updates

West (Assynt Peninsula) (TT)

Hind target largely met (1 short) with calves target exceeded. Helicopter count took place last week but figures not yet available, population model may need to be revisited. Habitat Impact Assessment data being collated between Jorine (sub-group secretary) and KGM. There were bits and pieces of information but it was proving difficult to extract the data for mapping purposes. Meeting to be held in April, hopefully will have count data by then.

HD reported Ardvar SSSI 2021 habitat assessment results were shared with owners. Key messages are browsing levels have increased since 2018 assessment. Prognosis is that there is a need for a reduction in grazing pressures, and NatureScot in discussion with land managers about how to achieve this. There is an awareness that sheep grazing in woodland areas also needs to be taken into consideration.

No further reports from community regarding deer in Lochinver. Cameron Kennedy, the estate keeper who had been helping with the issue, stepped down in January. The sub group will be liaising with his replacement once known.

TT noted that 5 sika stags were shot in the sub group area, which is more than normal, and wondered if others were noticing an increase.

South (DD)

DD also noticed an increase in Sika versus previous years.

Meeting was due yesterday, but it was decided to wait for count data therefore meeting will be held in May. Deer Management Plan due to be updated as reaching end of 5 years. Unclear whether Eisg Brachaidh fence is going ahead, likely to be end of summer before Forestry Commission decision is made. Updated DMP will need to take that into account so cannot really go ahead until this is known.

There is an issue regarding cull targets being exceeded due to crofters culls / Out of Season licences, with owners not aware of numbers being culled by crofters especially in the case of estates where owners are not present to speak to people.

North (DA)

Sub group had met the previous evening for an update. Discussed amongst other things a DMP update with Linzi Seivwright in autumn, taking into account her workload and changes in some estates including forestry proposals in the Laxford catchment areas by Reay Forest following work with Atlantic Salmon Trust.

Reay Forest target going down to 6 deer per km², which has been shared with sub group members. In addition, some peatland restoration work being carried out to conclude in the autumn, 115ha. Helicopter count due later this month, subject to availability (funded by estate not NatureScot)

Potential for ADMG assessments discussed, which may impact the way the DMP is set out.

AB added that there had been a debate about deer management vs land management, that in effect it becomes a Land Management Plan, and that deer welfare must be part of that as it may not be emphasised enough.

East (IT)

Meeting to be held in the summer, to start new plan for next five years. This should be fairly straightforward, and the population model already being worked on. No big changes expected vs current plan, land management changes can be adopted into it. Foresees it as a Deer Management Plan, with land management that affects deer management being included within it. Hopefully the DMP should be in place before the stag season starts.

8. Habitat Monitoring

KGM – to be updated at the November meeting as monitoring likely to be carried out over the next few months. Still gathering past data.

HD said it should be discussed now, or within the sub groups, for planning purposes, to keep tabs on what plans on coming season.

AB said North sub group planning to do it this year (Alistair Headley, Plantecol) as it had been a while since last monitoring.

DD asked if anything in from Jan Breckenridge for Inverpolly. KGM said had been speaking with Jan who had just started using QGIS mapping, and they hoped to work together on the plotting. [Jan has since got assistance from someone at NatureScot]

9. Fire Management Plans

Left on agenda from last meeting. DA mentioned a previous Action for members to add equipment to Community Asset Register with Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and suggested sharing the link again.

<https://www.firescotland.gov.uk/your-area/community-asset-register>

AB assumed Fire Management Plans would be included in DMPs.

10. ADMG (TT)

Waiting for plans following DWG recommendations and how ScotGov hope to implement those recommendations. There is no doubt that the industry will be asked to consider deer management and the impacts of deer in the light of the climate crisis. Target densities are a concern, 10 per km² on open hill will mean some reductions in numbers where necessary. One of the other big ones is the plan for a cull approval system, which would be a step away from the voluntary principle we have been working under. It is unclear how this will be done. NatureScot may be able to elaborate on this. They are going to be trialling a cost benefit analysis on how to implement this. ADMG would have some concern that this may make people take a step back from collaboration, and it could be detrimental to the work that has been done.

Around half of the recommendations will require a change in statute, likely to be included within a Natural Environment Bill. Concerns that it might cloud issues rather than tidy up. ScotGov has lately set up a strategic deer board made up of senior officials from various public agencies to set up work streams aimed at delivering deer management and the DWG recommendations, as part of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy which aims to reduce habitat loss by 2030.

ADMG will be endeavouring to help DMGs going into the next phase of deer management, and to tackle the challenges at a time when land management objectives are becoming increasingly varied across the Highlands. To help do that ADMG sit on a number of boards and steering groups to represent members, including the Access Forum, Scottish Venison Association, The Moorland Forum, the Deer Management Round Table, the Wild Deer Best Practice Working Group.

SQWV have struggled through Covid but have restructured. Assessments have become a bit more stringent, but fetching premium of 40p per kg at the moment which is helpful. Hopeful that there might be a recovery in venison products this year.

Access – some continuing issues with irresponsible access, working with NatureScot on this with social media and posters. There is a slot on the agenda of the next National Access Forum in June, hoping to highlight issues.

Common Ground Project moving into next phase, aimed at improving collaboration.

Investigation ongoing with SVA and NatureScot into greenhouse gas emissions from wild venison production.

Deer mapping database being rolled out DeerMap, hoping to enable people to plan in relation to changes to deer management.

Health Check for DMGs – fine tuning system to hopefully roll out this year, to provide DMGs with guidance as to what they should be doing on planning but also for DMGs to provide feedback to ADMG on areas where support is needed.

Change of logo – feedback through EScope suggests DMGs are on board with this.

With differing objectives within DMGs there is a need to concentrate on balanced discussions and to keep raised voices and arguments to a minimum.

So quite a lot going on, and hopefully there will be a good turnout at the AGM in Inverness next week.

IT asked for ADMG's position on the 10 deer per km² density target, given that we have been working for a number of years on habitat impact rather than density. TT agreed it was frustrating, especially with current average of 9.3/km² on open ground, while high densities reported in woodland. ADMG not completely happy with that, but it is one of the DWG recommendations nonetheless.

HD added that this is not the only lens through which NatureScot be evaluating groups. The density figure can help to identify areas where there may be potential issues, but other things will be looked at too.

JS asked about woodland carbon capture relative to peat, was there any documentation about this as it is generally peat about three times higher than woodland. TT agreed that carbon capture is more effective through peatland restoration than through woodland creation, no figures to hand however. JS felt that it was coming into prominence that peat should be a key component when looking at deer management on open ground. TT said funding had been a problem as only on annual basis previously and limited contractors to undertake the work. HD did not have facts and figures to hand but data is available on all different types of habitat, but peatland in terms of carbon capture is being recognised as important in some areas.

MH (SWT) added regarding peatland it does store carbon but only in healthy condition, if not it will release carbon in its damaged state so it needs to be good condition. Deer are a factor in healthy peatland, and they have been told 10 is too high for restoration.

DB (JMT) said the debate is more complex than peat vs deer. Anyone looking at maximising carbon capture should carry out a detailed survey of their ground to have a look at what is there just now and what the best options are. If money is the sole driver then there are differing rate payment levels – carbon captured, then if you add biodiversity benefit its another level, then add social good and so on. There is quite a difference in what the market will pay for these different levels.

DD added re. access that Highland Council had employed some Rangers who had been good at managing the roadside camping but away from the road there were still issues. Education should start at school.

11. NatureScot

HD will try not to repeat too much of ADMG report, emphasising that the driver of change and need for increased scale and pace in deer management is in relation to biodiversity and climate.

From the DWG recommendations, in simple terms, from a deer management perspective it is about preventing biodiversity loss by 2030 and having restoration by 2045. There are Legislative, Regulatory, Incentives and Delivery workstreams going on. Trials of image intensifying devices continue, for ScotGov to consider if implementation is to go ahead which will require legislative changes.

Habitat Impact Assessments are critical in terms of demonstrating evidence led deer management, and making sure that the information is used to inform cull planning. Sub groups are urged to make sure their plan is clear for habitat monitoring this coming season and that all members are aware what is expected of them so they can plan effectively.

Woodland monitoring is coming into focus, NatureScot and Scottish Forestry have been working with best practice steering group to agree methodology, which is based on the full woodland herbivore impact assessment but a slightly lighter version, with fewer indicators to be assessed.

Deer Count – APSG/Coigach area was counted by NatureScot last week, no information available as yet, in a very busy count season. Data will be shared as soon as it is available. When asked by MW the reason for these areas. HD explained that the reason for counting those areas was on a risk/concern basis, 2021 HIA for SSSI in APSG area threw up some concerns re. increased impacts, and there was the Inverpolly S7 history in Coigach. NatureScot have a rolling program for counts, but areas of concern are taken into account. AB noted the unfairness of those in S7s getting paid for counts, while those without issues having to pay themselves, but understood the politics of it. HD explained that generally match funded counts are expected but there are cases where NatureScot needs to fulfil their own needs for information. There is an awareness that helicopter counts are not the best in terms of cost and carbon emissions. AB mentioned drone technology and that he was looking at this for Scourie, as was his brother was for Loch A Mhuillin. HD confirmed that drone counts using infra red cameras are in the pipeline with extensive trials ongoing. There are some limitations, but they are being used in woodlands already.

MT asked if there was any work on deer movements between sub group and DMG areas. HD said there had been studies, and it would be useful but there are practical challenges. MW had tagged hind calves and they'd not gone far, one was half a mile from where it was tagged 9 years earlier. Huge regional variation in movements.

DA asked if woodland monitoring training days had been well attended. HD said a recent one at Beinn Eighe was not very well attended (50%), but had perhaps not been that well shared in advance. Other training days better attended and ones coming up oversubscribed, probably due to convenience of locations. Feedback was limited so far. DA said there was definitely demand in the north west.

12. Accounts (KGM)

Accounts for current year to date had been circulated (year end is 30th June), with some levy payments still to chase up, along with a report of current position. There were no questions or comments.

13. A.O.C.B.

KGM read out report from PC Daniel Sutherland. No reported cases of poaching within the DMG area in the year to April. There had been 14 in the Highland and Islands Division, with 7 recorded as a crime. Members are reminded to report suspicious circumstances or concerns wherever possible.

TT reported that RG had written a report for ADMG Newsletter on the Hill to Grill project (which JMT are running following the end of the CALLP programme).

DD asked for update on Eisg Brachaidh, and whether the EIA was going ahead and indeed the fence itself. EM said there was no update, still under review.

MH gave a report on North West Regenerate, which is in second stage of funding application. Following on from CALLP, landowners and stakeholders had submitted an expression of interest in accessing the Endangered Landscapes Programme, which is a European wide fund, up to \$5m over five years. The programme is supporting communities to drive and thrive from ecological restoration. It encompasses the area from Coigach to Durness and east to Bettyhill. It is separate from NW 2045 but will run in parallel and complement this. Expression of interest was co-ordinated by Scottish Wildlife Trust and John Muir Trust on behalf of all the partners. An approval in principle was received, after which a wider consultation was carried out for the more detailed Stage 2 application which was submitted in February. Despite the short time frame, only three months to develop the proposal, 27 partners have signed up. People are at the heart of this project, with a diverse range of themes, of which deer management is a factor. Decision expected in mid April, and if successful more detail will be developed. Please get in touch if any questions.

<https://www.coigach-assynt.org/2022/01/north-west-regenerate-another-exciting-opportunity-for-the-north-west-highlands/>

DA reported a similar project to Hill to Grill at Kinlochbervie High School involving Don O Driscoll of JMT and Seumas one of the Reay Forest stalkers.

JS brought up previous discussions about a lay person's explanation about what happens in the Highlands with deer. Lochinver Larder won a pie award for Scotland's Best Meat Pie for its venison and cranberry pie. Venison comes from Ardgay rather than from the immediate area, but he wanted to tell a story about the deer in the wider communication to the customer base, which is nationwide (50% in Scotland) and asked if there was an internet resource they can point people to, to learn more about why we cull deer. KGM

referred to the ADMG website. TT suggested the Scottish Venison Association, and could put him in touch with Dick Playfair. DA referred to the benefits of pursuing game for the table or just being out photographing deer. HD asked about discussions which had taken place within APSG about communication with the local community, TT said this hadn't really progressed. EM referred to the CALLP did a local survey about venison.

Hill to Grill – RG reported on project with Ullapool High after a two year break due to covid. A five day programme including camera stalking and process of turning wild venison into food (burgers), which tells the story about how and why we stalk and the end project. The children were very engaged throughout and there was benefit across many layers. This was the first time JMT have led on Hill to Grill and it is hoped to continue it next year.

14. Date of Next Meeting

Next meeting to be held on 9th November 2022, hopefully face to face.

An interim meeting could be arranged if required.

Meeting Closed at 3.25 pm