

West Sutherland Deer Management Group

Meeting via Zoom

Friday 19th November 2021

MINUTES

Participating:

David Allison (DA)	Reay Forest	Claire Belshaw (CB)	Assynt Foundation –
Adrian Wayne (AW)	Eisg Brachaidh	Joe Land (JL)	Glencanisp & Drumrunie
Robbie Galloway (RG)	Balnagown-Invercassley	Mark White (MW)	Glencassley
Don O’Driscoll (DoD)	JMT – Quinag/Kylesku	Roddy Watt (RW)	Merkland
James Vestey (JV)	Benmore Assynt	David Davies (DD)	Inverpolly
Jorine Van Delft (JVD)	CCWT	Alexander Macleod (AM)	Badentarbet
Romany Garnett (RG)	JMT- Quinag		

In Attendance:

Kirsty MacLeod (KGM)	WSDMG Secretary	Elaine MacAskill (EM)	Woodland Trust / EB
Tom Turnbull (TT)	ADMG / AP Sub Grp	Andy Summers (AS)	HC Ranger

1. Chairman’s Welcome

DA opened the meeting as proxy for Chair (Alan Balfour) who was unable to attend.

2. Apologies:

Alan Balfour	Scourie (Chair)	Derick MacAskill	Forestry & Land Scotland
Margaret Payne	Ardvar	Bruce Blackley	Benmore Assynt
Michelle Henley	SWT / Benmore Coigach	Iain Thomson	Sallachy
George Vestey	Inchnadamph	Claire Acheson	Galbraith – Eisg Brachaidh
Craig Ross	Inchnadamph	Tom Chetwynd (TC)	ADMG
Holly Deary (HD)	NatureScot	PC Daniel Sutherland	

3. Election of Office Bearers

DD proposed AB to continue as Chair, seconded by TT.

Formal elections to be postponed until Spring Meeting

DA asked if anyone had come forward as Vice Chair. KGM reported that Iain Thomson had stepped into this role.

4. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 21st March 2021

KGM apologised for lateness of the minutes of the last meeting being circulated.

DA had a correction Reay 169 hinds and 39 calves, should read 131 calves.

The minutes were agreed. Proposed TT, seconded RW.

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

- Fire Community Asset Register – not many had completed this.
- Assynt Foundation Fire Action Plan was circulated.
- South and AP sub group division of costs for secretarial – this has been discussed
- HIA data – on agenda

6. Stag Review 2021/22 Season

Glencassley (MW) – ten days late starting, managed to get numbers required. Stags were about 1kg lighter than last year. Aiming to cull around 50 hinds. Looking a bit lighter, calves have come later so a bit smaller.

Inverpolly (DD) – mild weather caused slow start to the rut, very wet. On target but in the last week a bit short due to guests from France unable to come. Still few spare stags around. Seeing more Sika, seem to be slowly building up.

Merkland (RW) – long drawn out rut, average weight much the same. No big ones. Increasing hind cull to around 60.

Eisg Brachaidh (AW) – slow start, unprecedented level of disturbance made keeper's job harder. Got 15 red stags, no sika this year.

Assynt Foundation (CB/JL) – met target, nothing to report.

Invercassley/Duchally (RG) – late rut and weather conditions made stalking quite challenging, a few short of target. Weights were good. Seeing some poor hinds, majority good. Starting on those next week.

Quinag (DoD/RG) – late rut, short a few on target. New deer larder facility at Glencanisip will assist with operations.

Benmore Assynt (JV) – BB shot 31 stags, reasonable condition, late rut. Started hinds.

Assynt Peninsula Sub-group (TT) – generally a bit short on cull target, waiting on one set of figures. Late rut, but should achieve target with a few out of season. Hearing similar reports across Scotland about late rut, weather caused difficulties.

Badentarbet (AM) – late rut, but not too worried as was just looking for poor beasts.

Reay Forest (DA) – hot weather made it quite difficult at the start of the season as deer were high up and difficult to extract, plus a lot of people about. Struggled to find older stags, more young ones. First few hinds shot have been poor, will be doing more at the start.

7. Deer Management Plans

Sub Group Progress Updates

East sub Group 2020/21 (report from IT read out by KGM)

Due to Covid-19 restrictions during the stag season, the ESG stag cull was 108 (70% of the planned cull of 155). Some estates managed to complete the planned cull and others will assess whether to up the cull over the next few years to make up this year's shortfall after next year's habitat monitoring and mortality and recruitment is analysed.

This year's habitat monitoring showed no difference from other years and the impact due to deer activity on dwarf shrub heath and blanket bog remains low. Willow springs habitat was monitored this year and results are still being analysed.

The hind cull for this year will be 160 which is an increase of 20 over the planned cull.

Property	Planned stag cull	Actual stag cull	Planned hind cull	Projected hind cull
Benmore	30	20	40	40
Duchally/Invercassley	30	30	20	20
Glencassley	30	30	30	50
Inchnadamph	50	20	50	50
Sallachy	15	8	0	0
Total	155	108	140	160

West (Assynt Peninsula) (TT)

Continued to meet via Zoom. Planned in-person meeting last week was postponed due to positive covid cases, rescheduled for this coming Monday. Cull short of target, but should be met with unreported numbers and out of season. Hind cull target increased slightly due to under culling during covid. In line with population model set up a few years back with aim of reducing density from 10 per km² to 7 per km² by 2023. More HIA done this year, groundwork has been done but data not collated yet. NatureScot survey undertaken of Ardvair Woodland SSSI, there are concerns about browsing levels. This will be discussed at the meeting. Still looking for someone to take over as Chair. Updating points in DMP as we go along.

South (DD)

Meeting to be held next week, no discussions since the spring. Dominated by Eisg Brachaidh fence proposal, which is with the Forestry Commission. There was a scoping meeting, but nothing heard for a few months. There was a count, but unaware of numbers. AF count carried out at same time, with numbers produced.

North (DA)

Sub group has not met for a while, quite a bit of work to do. Reay Forest plans only finalised this summer, with emphasis on reducing deer numbers and increasing woodland, and recovery of salmon and sea trout numbers in the Laxford system. Looking at a reduction from 8 deer per km² across the estate down to an average of 6. This has been shared with neighbours, but will have a big impact on the DMP. Agreed in principle for Linzi Seivwright to re-write the plans. Count planned for 2022 as a census check. HIA fairly favourable, just one or two hot spots. Fencing will be involved in plans to increase riparian woodland. Scale of what they do will be influenced by a partnership with Atlantic Salmon Trust for ten years, who will be doing an audit of the Laxford with aim of producing a list of work to be done.

8. Habitat Monitoring

KGM - the long awaited HIA mapping process is underway. More monitoring has been done this year, having not been done last year, and although there is plot information there is not much actual data. We should be able to show a lot more coverage than before. Hoping to gather information over the winter. Sharing information with JVD who is doing the same exercise for APSG.

DA referred to Alistair Headley's report, and would make a copy available for anyone interested to see this.

9. Fire Management Plans

DA commented that less deer inevitably means more likelihood of wild fires. Possibly a need to consider targeted burning so as to control this. TT referred to increased concerns reported about this, with numbers camping in the area. ADMG issue wild fire warnings, which are circulated to members by the secretary. DoD mentioned a small fire on Quinag. CALLP had prepared some signs in consultation with local estates, which have been distributed in the area. DD found that the new HC seasonal rangers had helped with speaking to people. DA said being tactful seems to help. He had attended an event in Kinlochewe, where the Fire service had commented that fires were easier to put out on managed ground, and recognised that collaboration with keepers was beneficial.

There was a brief discussion about insurance, with plans required by some insurers in respect of fire and use of helicopters.

10. ADMG

TT reported that there was quite a lot going on and in the pipeline. There have been a few online ADMG meetings, the most recent being a Chairs and Secretaries meeting in October which was well attended. AB had been at that. In person meeting was planned for next week at Kingsmills Hotel in Inverness.

Response to DWG report was issued, ScotGov had accepted 92 of the recommendations.

Main points are: removal of closed season, a publicly accessible national cull database, assessment process coming to an end, upper limit of 10 deer per km² on open hill, helicopter counting will be coming to an end with drone and satellite alternatives being looked at. Also planned was a cull approval mechanism, which sounds very much like statutory control and will be opposed by ADMG. Entering a continued period of stakeholder consultation, ADMG has written to the new minister for Environment and Land Reform outlining the work deer management has been doing and requested an opportunity to meet with her team. Also recently had meetings with NatureScot to discuss how things might be implemented, and where DMGs sit going forward. There is a commitment to collaborative deer management from NatureScot, which is encouraging. A period of limbo perhaps until the recommendations start to be implemented. It is clear that all rural policy going forward is going to be framed in the light of the climate crisis, and this will be the focus for ScotGov of deer management policy.

Scottish Venison Association has received £160,000 from ScotGov over past 2 years, which has been made available for market research, promotion and recovery, and a pilot chill processing project. Trend for local sales of venison, to add value. Increase in price for QA venison of 40p from Highland Game. Hopefully there will be a recovery in prices.

Access – many reports of irresponsible access had been received. ADMG have worked with NatureScot who have produced a poster for social media which can be downloaded. Members encouraged to report issues and positive stories to ADMG – see EScope.

A few projects on line, including conflicts in DMGs with opposing objectives and use of mediation to find a way forward.

Greenhouse gas emissions study in respect of deer has been commissioned by ADMG/SVA/NatureScot.

Considering deer mapping programme/database to map the impacts of deer management, for exclusion areas and areas of heavy culling what will be the impact on the deer and where will they move to.

Also looking at replacing NatureScot assessment process with a new assessment process, concentrating mostly on the benchmarking section, working with Victor Clements and Linzi Seivwright.

Considering a change in the ADMG logo, which will involve a consultation.

Concerns about September culling of hinds and calves by Forestry and Land Scotland, ADMG encourages in season culling and if outwith to follow best practice in respect of dependent calves.

Richard Cooke stood down as Chair of ADMG after 10 years, and was presented with a picture by Iain McGillivray at the Game Fair by Princess Anne. TT has taken over as Chair.

Met with Francesca Osowska (CEO) and Robbie Kernahan (Director of Sustainable Growth) of NatureScot earlier this week and encouraged by their support of collaborative approach/DMGs.

11. NatureScot

No one present to provide update

12. CALLP Update

Deer Management Project

EM reported that ended in September, with certain projects having an exemption to December.

KGM highlighted that WSDMG has benefited a lot from CALLP as a group. CB also congratulated them on a recent award.

13. Accounts (KGM)

Accounts for current year to end of June 2021 were circulated, which need to be approved, along with a report of current position. ADMG levy had been estimated, invoice has since come in just a little above.

Secretarial fees still to be paid for 2021. Last of SNH HIA money has finally being distributed.

Accounts proposed by TT, seconded by DD.

14. A.O.C.B.

RG reported a change in stalking on Quinag to use of a contractor, starting with hind season.

KGM looking to step down as Secretary due to lack of availability between April and October, so March would be her last meeting. She would not leave the group in the lurch though. Administration is not too much of a problem, but meetings are so it could be worth considering a job share role with a separate minute secretary.

DA thanked KGM for her efforts, having worked with her during his tenure as Chair. KGM said she had been in post for fourteen years, and had seen a lot of changes in that time.

15. Date of Next Meeting

Next meeting to be held in March. KGM to circulate an on line poll in January.

It might be possible to have in person meeting. It had been discussed to have one meeting on line and one in person going forward.

Meeting Closed at 3:55pm