

West Sutherland Deer Management Group

Meeting

Via Zoom

Wednesday 20th May 2020 at 2pm

MINUTES

Participating:

Alan Balfour (AB)	Acting Chair/Scourie	Claire Acheson (CA)	Galbraith - Eisg Brachaidh/Inver&Kirkaig
David Allison (DA)	Reay Forest	Claire Belshaw (CB) Lewis MacAskill (LM)	Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp & Drumrunie
Mark White (MW)	Glencassley	Mark Mackenzie (MM)	Keanchulish
Jorine Van Delft (JVD)	CCWT - Little Assynt	Roddy Watt (RW)	Merkland
Fiona Saywell (FS)	CCWT / CALLP	Iain Thomson (IT)	Sallachy
Chris Gordon	Balnagown- Invercassley	Michelle Henley	SWT – Benmore Coigach
Richard Williams	JMT – Quinag		

In Attendance:

Kirsty MacLeod (KGM)	WSDMG Secretary	Holly Deary	SNH
Tom Chetwynd (TC)	ADMG	Sue Agnew	SNH -Ullapool
Phil Jones Catherine Anderson	Assynt Community Council	Alistair Headley	
Tom Turnbull	ADMG		

1. Acting Chairman's Welcome

AB opened the meeting by thanking everyone for coming.

2. Apologies:

Andy Hibbert	Loch Assynt Lodge	Don O'Driscoll	JMT-Quinag + Kylesku
Marcus Munro	Ledmore House Estate	David & Jenny Balfour	Loch a Mhuillin
John Snyder	Middle Inver	Derick MacAskill	FLS
Victor Clements	DMP author	Robert McHardy	Glencanisp & Drumrunie

3. Election of Office Bearers

Chair was elected at November meeting, Vice Chair still needed. AB proposed leaving this until next meeting post-lockdown.

4. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 13th November 2019

The minutes were agreed.

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

KGM presented main points of the last meeting. All items actioned or on the agenda.

6. Hinds Review 2019/20 Season

Cull figures presented – separate tables for red and sika/roe.

Sallachy (IT) – no stags shot, but East Sub Group target as expected, no issues with hind cull. Fairly normal season.

Reay Forest – held back by poor weather in December and January, a rush to meet hind target but managed to do it.

Glencanisp/Drumrunie – CB reported stalker struggled to find the hinds to shoot.

APSG (JVD) – weather was not helpful, did not quite meet target. Number to be adjusted. KGM had received figures from Fiona Saywell just before meeting.

AB asked if HD had any comments. HD said it would be useful to see actual alongside targets. KGM will prepare as separate table showing the most reason season actual vs target. ACTION KGM

7. Deer Management Plans

Sub Group Progress Updates / Interim Review / Health Check

South

KGM reported in absence of DD, having taken minutes of last two meetings. South is a little behind the other sub groups. There was a meeting earlier this year, and another one is due. Cull figures received now, need to get the model updated and assess position re. habitat monitoring. Meeting may have to be online like this one.

East

IT reported progressing as per DMP. Habitat monitoring to go ahead this year, 120 plots throughout the group.

North

DA reported target hit last two years in terms of desired population, model will need updated for count figures. Culls have been targeted in areas which HIA showed higher impact. Delivering on commitments in the DMP. However the DMP is due for renewal, coming to end of 5 year life. Major changes unlikely. AB confirmed a meeting will take place in the next few months.

West (Assynt Peninsula)

JVD reported working on getting a paid Secretary position. Trying to arrange a Zoom meeting soon to discuss HIA and stag targets. Some people have been able to do HIA, others have not as classed as non-essential travel.

8. AOCB – Deer in Lochinver

PJ talked about further complaints received by Assynt Community Council earlier in the year about increase in deer in Lochinver, at playparks and at the roadside. Asking for input via the ACC Facebook page, 90% agreed there were too many deer, but only 50% favoured a cull and others looked for a humane way to deal with the problem. More deer than ever since Covid-19. Looking for suggestions of help.

WSDMG is here to provide support but would need a steer on what the community wants to do before it can help in terms of organising action, but can provide a point of communication with the relevant estates meantime. AB said a cull has got to be part of the solution, and there needs to be some acceptance of that from the community or it would be very difficult to do anything. Any cull would need to be done discreetly. HD explained a Section 10 is part of deer legislation is an emergency measure, but can be used in an enabling way. AB happy to act as facilitator with representatives from ACC and estates, with SNH input. Fencing is a measure. LM asked if ACC had reached out to Lochcarron. They hadn't, but had discussed trying to obtain funding for fencing the play area. AB offered to come to a meeting. AH mentioned culling was used to deal with a deer problem in Skye.

PJ's connection went at this point. KGM asked about the feeding of the deer in the village, which would need to stop. DA said you will always have the ones who want to see them and feed them, and those who feel the opposite. The only way to protect gardens is to fence them.

HD suggested issuing a questionnaire to the community to gauge opinion, which could be constructed to inform as well. KGM said a tick-box type questionnaire, and offered to take that forward with HD's input. JVD was also happy to help.

TC said at Lochcarron there were only really three vocal members keen to see reduction, and a collaborative cull took place in November 2018 removing 68 deer (mainly hinds and calves) on the periphery of the village, with most of the community being unaware. There was no questionnaire beforehand but afterwards people had not been too bothered either way. Virtually no deer in Lochcarron in 2019/20 season. His understanding was ACC had contacted Lochcarron CC. However the cull was

undertaken by South Ross DMG. AB asked where it should be done. KGM said there were clear pathways where the deer were coming in, so deer could be shot well outwith the village at those points of entry. LM agreed with this approach. There were three main routes, either end of the village and behind. TC said at Lochcarron they used people on the Fit & Competent register, monitoring known routes in, so there was a certain amount of night shooting but nobody was aware of the activity. DA suggested summer months prior to autumn would be best. KGM will feed this back to ACC, and offer to work with them on a questionnaire. AB asked if it was particularly a winter problem, KGM confirmed it was year round issue in Lochinver. WSDMG to continue to liaise with ACC – South and Assynt Peninsula Sub Groups.

9. Habitat Impact Assessments

KGM in the process of collating HIA data in order to map it, quite a bit of work to do. Funding from CALLP for time, claimed for equivalent of 3.5 days. Work in progress, but it will help identify where the gaps are. IT asked for more detail, what was meant by mapping. KGM replied it would be using the datasets from each sub group, so each plot would be marked red, green and amber dots providing a snapshot. Similar to maps prepared by VC for NWSDMG. IT wondered why each sub group couldn't provide this, he could send up to date dataset files for East sub group. KGM said that would be very helpful, other sub groups may not be in a position to provide in this form but she would be requesting details they do have from each sub group. DA will send what AH has done for North sub group.

10. Financial Position

KGM presented Profit & Loss accounts and Balance Sheet. Year end is June, this was to April but includes most of the transactions for the year.

Current Position more relevant. Secretary fees still to be paid. Leaves a negative balance, however £2812.39 in fees outstanding. Much of this has since come in, but no up to date bank statement.

A table was presented showing total amount invoiced by WSDMG for last two years. The net amount for WSDMG expenses was just short of £2500. Group levy was increased 2 years ago. Out of this Secretary fees are £1200, so not much wiggle room.

We had talked about paid sub-group secretaries. CALLP are offering to fund 60% of fees for year 1 and 40% in year 2, for the two sub groups in the CALLP area (South and Assynt Peninsula). On this basis we have enough to pay £1000 to each of those, but this does not cover the other two sub groups.

IT said his understanding was that one of the benefits of being in WSDMG was that it provided secretarial services for each sub group. East and North operate without secretary, which works well because [KGM] is there providing that service. The other two sub groups, AP in particular has struggled with not having anyone to fulfil that role, there may be an opportunity to merge the two sub groups.

TT (ADMG Vice Chair). There had been some talk of ADMG stepping in to help the APSG in Chair role, and was happy to come in to do that for a year, if the members wanted that. JVD said that would be very helpful. TT will contact JVD through KGM, and take this forward by setting up a Zoom meeting. There may be a couple of people able to take on the role next year.

AB had some sympathy with IT. KGM mentioned that there were fewer estates in North sub group. JVD explained her position in terms of the increase in the workload for the secretary and her seasonal work commitments, people do not always have the ability to give time to unpaid work.

HD noted that the disparity between the four sub groups in terms of deer management planning and the delivery of those plans, with both of these sub groups behind. One of the main reasons for the sub groups being set up was that it had been difficult to get agreement in that particular area, and doing so has allowed the DMG as a whole to progress more than it might have otherwise. DA was of the opinion that if there is available resource from CALLP for the two groups to pay secretaries to help bring them up to speed we should be encouraged to take that. TT happy to discuss further with the AP sub group.

There is generally much more work involved altogether, not just two meetings a year like it used to be. TT confirmed more DMGs were appointing paid Secretaries, which was beneficial in the smooth running of DMGs as well as helping to encourage members to take on the role of Chair if they know that support is in place. It was agreed to proceed on the basis of support from CALLP subject to available funds.

[KGM sub note: It would be possible to differentiate the group levy amount for members of these two sub groups to cover the 40% and 60% for this year and next year, thus making it fairer for those not benefiting directly, i.e. members of the other two sub groups].

11. Structure of WSDMG

AB referred to a previous meeting to discuss the structure of the group which had resulted in no changes, but an agreement that it would be reviewed again. A further review will be carried out with Sub-Group chairs and Secretaries.

DA said we should be considering an increase in the levy if funds are low. AB wondered how the current situation might affect the stalking season, in terms of clients paying for stags, and selling the carcasses. IT felt now was not the time to increase costs with uncertain income. KGM confirmed that there should be sufficient for this year's costs with an unchanged levy. Levy is based on 5 year average stag cull number. There was some discussion about a minimum levy amount of say £50. DA wondered whether this year should be excluded from the 5 year average, since the cull may be lower during lockdown, KGM confirmed levy is normally raised in late summer, but would be held off as ADMG were doing so with their levy invoicing. This year's cull would not affect invoices until next year. It was agreed to review the levy next year.

12. ADMG Report

TT provided an update, such as was possible under the current circumstances. They would have been discussing the DWG Report and the SNH review last year/early this year in detail, but that had gone on the backburner. More immediately pressing was the venison situation, with closure of restaurants and food services and no guarantee when it might re-open. Some game dealers are re-opening but difficult to get prices or commitment to volume. ADMG met with representative organisations and ScotGov to highlight the impact on venison, deer management, environmental concerns (tree damage) and impact on rural communities and businesses. It would be wise for suppliers to keep in contact with venison dealers. ADMG has sent out on EScope (also available on website) a sporting lets survey in response to Covid-19 to gauge potential impact on culls, so they can take that back to ScotGov. ADMG has written to ScotGov Finance Secretary Kate Forbes to ask why sporting businesses and deer forests had been excluded from Business Rates being applied (letter also on E-Scope). Waiting for SNH Review, which was quite favourable with some caveats. DWG reported in February in a document 374 pages long with 99 recommendations to Government. A fairly comprehensive account of the history of deer management in Scotland. ADMG has commented on most of these recommendations, in particular those where they had some issue. Impact should be the focus, while the report talks at length about deer numbers. A figure of 10 deer per km² in the open range is quoted, in contrast to the SNH figure of 9.3 last year. The most concerning thing was that collaboration between deer managers and landowners appears to be unimportant in the review, which is completely at odds with the SNH review which said that collaboration is becoming increasingly effective. The DWG considers individual landholdings are more important as they have the final say in how deer are managed, which completely disregards the free roaming nature of red deer and the need to manage them on a landscape scale. The report recommends that the assessment period we have been going through for the last six years comes to an end, again in contradiction to SNH's report which highlights the progress made, largely due to the assessment process. The DWG report suggests the aerial count programme comes to an end, seen as not necessary going forward. All these recommendations have gone to Government and it is very persuasive report, but with Covid-19 and an election next year it is difficult to know when the two reports will be considered. ADMG have been told that they are being reviewed by ministers.

ADMG subscriptions are postponed until October, to be reviewed then, potentially including a reduction if no sporting income coming in. Forestry & Land Scotland subscriptions will be going to ADMG direct, and not through DMGs. All other subscriptions for DMG expenses (secretarial etc) should still be invoiced to FLS. KGM reported that Derick MacAskill had suggested Sika might be removed from the calculations, which would make a significant impact in terms of income to WSDMG. TT was not aware of this but will look into it.

ADMG AGM was postponed, to be rescheduled in the autumn.

13. SNH

HD added that DWG recommendations ranged from small detail, tidying up legislation, and others quite fundamental relating to numbers of deer on the ground. A response had been expected in the autumn on both the DWG and SNH reports, but it is looking unlikely now.

AB asked about the possible impact on cull levels due to carcase disposal issues. ScotGov is looking for natural heritage to feature in the recovery from (Covid) and SNH would be looking for cull targets to be

met. While it is recognised that it will be challenging - there is an expectation that game dealers will resume operation although capacity may be limited – it is hoped that culling will commence early in the season so carcasses going to dealers are distributed evenly across the season. IT pointed out that venison was only one part of the equation, with paying guests being a major income source, staying in accommodation etc. There should be flexibility in terms of a smaller cull this year with the total being made up in subsequent years. HD responded that this would be different for each estate, but maybe looking towards UK client base would be something to consider. It is recognised that there are challenges, but not to hold off completely.

14. CALLP (Coigach-Assynt Living Landscapes Partnership)

KGM read out report from Fiona Saywell

Deer Management Training:

DSC 1 –Postponed, hopefully will take place in September . 4 places still available out of 10.

Venison/Butchery – 5 people attended workshop in January. Hope to host another at the beginning of 2021.

Community engagement:

Questionnaires & public enqagement

There is a need for more community engagement between the DMG members and local community in order to help people understand the requirement and process of deer management.

In starting this process we have put together a draft venison questionnaire. This has been kindly circulated by Kirsty among the DMG – please comment if there is something that you would like to find out in relation to local venison requirements. We aim to circulate to the public over the next couple of months via usual methods and 1-1 phone interviews.

This is an opportunity to engage with wider public. The aim is to then produce a recipe booklet and an information leaflet on deer and deer management for distribution, hopefully via some public events. We are looking for input from the DMG to produce a publication that helps to promote the sector and widens knowledge in the local community.

Hill to Grill

Booked with Kinlochbervie High School to carry out a Hill to Grill programme in November in partnership with Reay Forest at Achfary, repeating the successful programme at Ullapool High School.

DA suggested that WSDMG should be recognised as a partner in any leaflet that goes out.

15. A.O.C.B.

DA highlighted Margaret Payne’s incredible efforts in raising £400,000 for NHS and Highland Hospice. There is a link on the ADMG newsletter.

16. Date of Next Meeting

Second meetings would normally be held in November, when hopefully face to face would be possible. HD suggested an open line of communication to share experiences, from a cull planning perspective. AB agreed that an on-line catch up meeting was a good idea. Early August would be a good time, as we should by then have a better idea of what travel restrictions are likely to be for the stag season.

It was suggested that higher attendance might be possible if at least one of the meetings was held on-line in future, with the impact of travel time not an issue. KGM noted that some were unable to participate due to internet issues. It was agreed to have at least one face-to-face meeting, in November.

Virtual Meeting to be held on August 12th at 2pm (tbc) [note: this meeting did not take place]

Main formal meeting to be held on 11th November at 2pm

Meeting Closed at 3:25pm

MAIN ACTION POINTS		ACTION
1.	Separate cull table to prepared showing actual against target for most recent season	KGM
2.	Liaise with ACC re. deer in Lochinver	AP/South Sub Groups
3.	HIA data to be collated and mapped digitally	KGM
4.	Progress funding support from CALLP for sub group secretaries for South and AP	KGM
5.	WSDMG Group levy to be reviewed in 2021	WSDMG
6.	Contact CALLP regarding recognition of WSDMG's contribution in leaflet	KGM