

Gairloch Conservation Unit

Minutes of meeting – NatureScot Offices Anancaun Kinlochewe

9.30am 25th April 2022

1. **In attendance** – John Wills (Chairman), Linzi Seivwright, Tim Bowie, Seamus MacNally, Doug Bartholomew, Ian Sargent, Paul Bolton, Kieran Coulson (NatureScot stalker), Emily Gibson (Grudie)
2. **Apologies** – Sir Nicholas Bacon, Sir Paul Nicholson, Donnie Beaton, Russell Cooper.
3. **Minutes of last meeting** – 3rd November 2021 and matters arising (addressed in meeting)

4. **ADMG update** – LS outlined that the Deer Working Group made 99 recommendations and future many proposals will stem from forthcoming legislation. The ADMG AGM was held in Inverness on 23rd April 2022 with a good discussion led by Nick Halfhide from NatureScot. There needs to be a good discussion with Government particularly around cull setting. The role of DMG's seems to be downplayed by the Scottish Government but the ADMG are resisting this. There is a lot of behind-the-scenes discussions and there may need to be changes in primary and secondary legislation. The future of The Deer Act is uncertain. The ADMG want to ensure there is the right level of scrutiny. Changes to closed seasons will follow with no closed season for male deer and adjustments (lengthening) of the female seasons. The use of image intensifiers is still a recommendation that will require consultation before being adopted.

It is unclear at what scale the nationwide target maximum deer density of 10 per km Sq. will apply – will it be at local deer group level or nationwide? Numbers must surely be based on local environmental impacts. There is concern culls might be imposed on groups, but it may be done by consultation. Perhaps designated sites will be key targets.

Lorna Slater MSP is taking the Government lead on this but there is concern that discussions are being had at the highest level without involving managers. A Strategic Deer Board made up of the heads of forestry, agriculture and NatureScot has been created. There is no AGMG representation on the board and there must be involvement from those on the ground.

Currently the environment (peat/trees/climate) trumps everything. We need to watch for the detail with care.

5. **Update on Glen Torridon Partnership (Woodland Scheme)** -provided by DB & PB is an informal partnership between NatureScot, NTS, Coulin, Ben Damph and Woodland Trust Scotland. Key focus will be on rhododendron removal with a joint funding application for grant aid. It will also look at riparian planting potential (to improve fisheries and particularly to support juvenile salmonids). No firm plans currently in place, but Wester Ross Fisheries Trust are applying under The Cool Waters Initiative. This initiative might

create an opportunity to invite Gairloch Estate back into the group. There are benefits at looking at landscape scale woodland planting and WTS will help fund collaborative scheme applications. We might consider the DMG making an application to The Nature Fund for support. A good example of current work is that of Ross Jobson at The Tweed Foundation where they are trying to make riparian woodland creation cost neutral. This might be achieved by selling carbon credits.

6. **Deer Count** – the last group count was in the spring of 2017 by helicopter. Gairloch had planned a spring count (2022) but it was uncertain if this has been completed. It would be beneficial to co-operate over a group wide plan to secure cost efficiencies at scale. A count should be considered dependent on the outcome of habitat impact assessments. The cost of helicopter hire plus NatureScot looking to avoid helicopter use (carbon & costs) might make this unlikely. We need more strategic thinking to keep deer out of Beinn Eighe Reserve. We may look at tagging as a project for a PhD student – SM to discuss with Norman Kelman (Head Stalker – Letterewe). NTS and NatureScot will most likely complete a foot count in the spring of 2023.
7. **Cull updates** – NTS 6 stags (average age 10)/29 hinds (average age 5.76)/20 calves (11 male/9 female). NatureScot 86 stags/36 hinds/18 calves (half male). Slattadale 9 stags/2 hinds/5 roe bucks/3 sika stags. Noted average age of stags shot at Beinn Eighe was 2 years 8 months. Almost 50% of stags culled had broken antler(s). It appears to be young stags coming into the reserve during the winter. Grudie 7 stags, 4 hinds, 1 yearling & 1 calf.
8. **Any other business** – JW asked about updating HIA's. NatureScot completed updates last year and NTS last four years ago. LS emphasised how this is an important management tool and ideally should be repeated every three years taking account of the ground conditions and overall impact will educate cull plans. Consider too how you want the habitat to look and over what timescale.
JW to join South-West Ross Deer Group meeting by invitation (if possible) on 18th May 2022
9. **Finance and subscriptions** – All subscriptions are presently up to date. The current bank balance stands at £1574.73
10. **Date of next meeting** – 7th October 2022 9.30am at NatureScot Offices

After the close of the meeting Doug Bartholomew was kind enough to lead an inspection of two key sites of natural regeneration on the reserve (close to the Grudie march and in Glen Torridon) to see the winter impacts of deer.