

Gairloch Conservation Unit

Meeting minutes 24th February 2021

By Zoom

- **Welcome and introduction and apologies:** Those attending – John Wills, Sir Paul Nicholson, Sir Nicholas Bacon, Duncan Mackenzie (part), Richard Cooke (part), Ian Sargent, Russell Cooper, Megan Rowland, Doug Bartholomew, Dan Watson (NTS), Seamus MacNally, Linzi Seivwright, Tim Bowie. Apologies received from Donnie Beaton (Diabaig).
- **Minutes of October 2020 meeting and matters arising** – no points raised. The Chairman gave a vote of thanks for the outstanding service of Seamus MacNally as Secretary/Treasurer with members echoing their thanks.
- **Appointment of office bearers** – The Chair proposed Tim Bowie as Secretary/Treasurer seconded by Sir Nicholas Bacon.
- **Membership annual contribution** – Seamus MacNally confirmed he has sent out his Treasurers Report. In addition, referred to hind density at about 2 per km² (although Torridon slightly higher). We are about 120 stags short of our target density but a reduction of 120 hinds which should give an overall density of 3 per km².
- **Covid-19** - restrictions – not discussed
- **Understanding deer movements** – Duncan Mackenzie referred to Seamus MacNally setting out desired deer numbers but with a shortfall of 120 stags and the Nature.Scot culls over the past 3-4 years he cannot continue in the group and The Gairloch Estate will leave. The Chair expressed his regret and along with Seamus will speak to Duncan.
- Richard Cooke (ADMG) expressed his concern, and that conflict is best dealt with by dialogue and Duncan should be asked to return. The Chair expressed the need for all parties to endeavour to find the middle ground. Richard Cooke added the essence of the DMG's is collaboration and communication and Nature.Scot has a statutory objective to do so.
- Linzi Seivwright said the Beinn Eighe paper was a step forward. We are at the end of the current five-year plan and we can reflect on next steps. This includes understanding where deer are coming from (those culled out of season/at night) – they must be coming from outside the group (potentially from South West Ross DMG area).
- Possible actions include a site visit to Beinn Eighe to see damage, take soundings from other groups, trial calf tagging and maintain good larder records.
- Ian Sargent expressed his sadness at Gairloch Estate leaving the group and extended his and Nature.Scot thanks to Seamus. Nature.Scot do not wish to shoot the numbers of deer they do but they are trying to minimise damage in the NNR and they are willing to discuss the challenges.
- The Chair said Nature.Scot must accept there will be a problem of deer entering the NNR as the habitat (shelter/food) continues to improve. We must establish where the deer come from particularly in hard weather. New deterrents should be trialled.

- Tim Bowie offered to assist but said stag calves tagged in 2021 might not be seen in the NNR for several seasons. Ian Sargent said it is time consuming and labour intensive. Tom Chetwynd (Secretary South West Ross DMG) set out their population. Over 56,000 h/a and with sixteen group members mostly sporting but with some conservation the spring 2017 deer count gave a density of 7.5 deer per km². They have identified an “export” of about 100 stags annually from the area although this is not presently an issue for the group. The hind population is stable, but stag numbers have decreased from 1350 to 1000 between 2017 & 2020. They have a steady decline with losses from the railway and night shooting well recorded.

SW Ross DMG are working in conjunction with The Woodland Trust and others (seven landowners) at the western end of Loch Torridon. There is room for more co-operation.

Ian Sargent explained about a landscape scale project (€2m) with The Woodland Trust and others (inc. Ben Damph/Coulin/NTS Torridon) for rhododendron removal/control and woodland expansion has been submitted for funding. May include riparian woodland in Torridon fenced to protect trees but also limit deer movement. These discussions are at an early-stage outcome to be known later in 2021. Project will include project Officer, last five years and commence early in 2022. (Richard Cooke left meeting).

Tom Chetwynd said members of South West Ross DMG (at the east end) particularly with full-time stalkers might assist in tagging calves.

The Chair asked for cull data which Linzi Seivwright will collate and circulate. He was keen to have training on HIA's.

- **Actions to reduce out of season culling** – Doug Bartholomew said that night shooting was necessary in high priority areas (especially controlling Sika). The group were interested to know what technologies can be used as deterrents.
 - Tom Chetwynd reported that FLS in East Sutherland are shooting the first stag with a moderator fitted and the second/third without. This deterrent appears effective for a fortnight. Russell Cooper said that point of impact changes significantly with/without moderator and using a moderator only reduced shot noise close to target animal.
- 9. Deer Management Plan renewal** – The Chair asked if this was fit for purpose? The group needs to wait to see the outcome of the Deer Working Group which will influence next steps but is likely to emphasise public interest, peatland protection and woodlands but we must look outside the group and perhaps bring in our neighbours. More engagement would be beneficial.
- Megan Rowland explained that Nature.Scot officers had little insight into the response of the Scottish Government to the Deer Working Group. Question was asked if it would be a good idea to have a meeting with the other Chairs and Secretaries from adjacent

groups. Linzi reported that this happened in South Ross (5 DMGs collectively) and led to a good understanding between members with the five Chairs meeting annually. They count to whole area at the same time. Linzi Seivwright will speak to Richard Cooke.

- 10. Discussion of principles and policies of collaboration in DMG** – The Chair reminded the group of the shared commitment to a sustainable and economic countryside. We have to get along and he has great respect for Nature.Scot staff and we are lucky the NNR is so well managed and ought to be able to accommodate their plans.
- 11. Counts made or proposed** – Linzi Seivwright advised the last (helicopter) count was in spring 2017 and will continue to be used until technical challenges are overcome with drones/satellite. Might there be an opportunity to count a wider area? Megan Rowland pointed out there is a “carbon” cost with utilising helicopters. The NTS could carry out a spring count with support of neighbours (Nature.Scot might have capacity). Group to consider a collective foot count in conjunction with SW Ross if possible.
- 12. Set and agree culls** – The Chair pointed out we can only cull reasonable numbers and if we repeat our HIA’s again this summer this will guide cull targets. South West Ross DMG plan a count this spring. The Group to undertake repeat habitat impact assessments this year -and refreshing training could be arranged by Linzi if required.
- 13. Review of Working Plan and Annual Report** – Linzi Seivwright will collate cull information and review actions but we are reasonably on top of actions.
- 14. Any other business** – Ian Sargent asked what was planned in terms of reviewing our current plan? It was agreed to await publishing of Deer Working Group report but continue HIA’s as monitoring needs to continue.
- 15. Date of next meeting** – 6th October 2021 at 9.30am at Nature.Scot offices