

SOUTH WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
Friday, 25 September 2015 – Lochcarron Village Hall, Ross-shire, 10:00

MINUTES

Present:

Philip Smith (Chairman), Mark Pattinson (Treasurer), Diana Jordan (Secretary), David Abraham, Mark Adams, Tom Chetwynd, Sinclair Coghill, Russell Cooper, Richard Curzon, Nick Dalgety, Mary Gibson, Piotr Godziszewski, Duncan Gray, Charlie Hill, Kurt Larson, Shaun Macdonald, David Mackenzie, Archie McLellan, Neil Morrison, Claire Munday, Helen Munday, Gillian Pattinson, Rory Putman, Mary Smith, Hugh Tollemache, Rosie Tollemache, Richard Wills

1. Welcome

Mr Smith, as Chairman, opened the meeting at 10:30 and welcomed those in attendance.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Mark and Alison Raeside (Culdoran), Major Tom Wills and Chris Mackenzie (Achnashellach), Colin Murdoch and Charlie Anderson (North Strome/Reraig), Justin Block (Fionnaraich).

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting – Friday, 29 May 2015

There were no comments upon the minutes of the previous meeting and no matters arising. Therefore, Mr Smith signed the minutes as being a true record of that meeting.

4. Finance

In his capacity as Treasurer, Mr Pattinson presented the accounts for the year 2014/15. An opening balance was reported of £2,298.89 (as at 18 September 2014), with a closing balance of £1,433.96 (as at 17 September 2015).

Payments during the year were the annual ADMG subscription (£841.65), Lochcarron Village Hall hire (£45) and secretarial fees of £1,058.28. The secretarial fees are higher than previous years due to the engagement of CKD Galbraith to provide the secretariat function.

Mr Pattinson then provided a cashflow forecast going forward to 30 September 2016. This detailed receipts of £6,250 (Deer Management Plan) and subscriptions of £1,080.

Budgeted payments include Deer Management Plan fees (£6,250), ADMG subscription (£1,000), secretarial fees (£1,200) and hall hire (£1,000). This would lead to a potential deficit of £687.00.

The budgeted figure for hall hire was queried as being high. It was duly clarified that the hire of the hall currently cost the group £45 per session, therefore totalling £90 for the two meetings during the year. This would therefore alleviate the financial position.

Mr Pattinson advised that SNH have currently paid £1,500 of the anticipated £6,250 contribution. The balance will be paid in when SNH are happy with the DMP. Prof Putman clarified that at this stage he has only billed the DMG for work carried out to date, and not the full amount. An additional balancing bill will follow in due course.

5. Deer Management Plan and Associated Matters

As the DMP reaches conclusion, Mr Smith thanked all who had collaborated with Prof Putman to provide an excellent, up-to-date plan, which is almost twice as long as the previous plan in place, and that will last for a period of five years.

Prof Putman thanked all members for their support during the DMP process and apologised that various versions had been required due to ongoing refinement by SNH of expectations/requirements.

Due to the length of the exercise Prof Putman felt that cull figures should be updated to include the 2014/15 figures and, as such, the Secretary will pass the latest cull figures to him for inclusion.

He noted he has recently received further feedback from SNH on the latest draft Plan circulated earlier in the week and noted that there were, in essence, two major areas where Sinclair Coghill requested further alterations. Thus: SNH have urged that the Plan should make more formal reference to ongoing use of population models in determining likely population outcomes of culls planned. Prof Putman agreed that that population models could indeed prove useful tools for forward projection, but that for a group of this size they would be most relevant if applied at sub-populations level to the discrete populations within the overall Management Area already identified within the Plan. He noted, however, that data currently available was incomplete or at insufficient resolution to permit effective models to be developed at this stage. However it was a commitment within the Plan that appropriate data would be collected in the future and that these figures should be assessed through population models for the future. He is happy to assist with ongoing modelling. In the meantime the Plan would include a commitment to this and make specific reference to SNH's online population model being available to meet this requirement.

Sinclair Coghill had also requested that a commitment should be made to record Deer/Vehicle Collisions within the area and for these to be reported to the National Deer Collisions database (www.deercollisions.co.uk). The bulk of data collated on the national database is from the trunk road network and it is felt that regular recording of DVCs elsewhere within the area would be of help in identifying collision hotspots. Prof Putman suggested that a report could be made from each estate at every DMG meeting to establish a record of incidents, following which the Group could make a full submission to update the national database on an annual basis.

Most other matters had been dealt with and he felt that once the two above-noted elements are refined, then the plan would be ready for sign-off.

Mr Coghill noted that he had not yet reviewed the designated site details in the plan.

Prof Putman informed the Group that there had been a recent re-assessment of Site Condition for the Rassal SAC and that, while the final report was not yet prepared, Mary Gibson had forwarded to him and email from the contractor who had carried out the Site Condition Monitoring, advising of the likely content of his report. This was to note that there remained some concerns about impacts within the SAC, and although these were largely to do with sheep grazing, and would not necessarily have major implications for future deer management, SNH would be wishing to review the current Collaborative Management Agreement between the Estates concerned (Lochcarron, Kinlochdamph, Tullich). He re-assured Mr Coghill that the Plan had been updated to take note of this and all Mary Gibson's other comments.

Prof Putman stressed that it was helpful to have a five-year plan in place rather than a 10-year plan, as this made the DMP flexible to future changes. If it were definitive and set in stone, the plan would be more difficult to adapt to ongoing monitoring and changing requirements.

When asked what the ongoing priorities were for the group in meeting standards, Prof Putman responded that collaborative deer management was key, involving the co-ordination and integration of efforts to achieve sustainable and effective deer management across the entire range of a given population of deer.

He stated that it was crucial that different/distinct populations of deer were identified and the effects of combined culls on reported count figures carefully assessed in order to ensure that offtake of stags remained within sustainable limits and that adequate culls of hinds were taken across each area to ensure hind numbers were maintained at appropriate levels. He felt it would be useful for clusters of Estates within each subpopulation area to gather informally outwith the regular DMG meetings to consider and coordinate ongoing management.

Prof Putman advised that Scottish Government's requirements for deer management planning placed a greater emphasis on habitat monitoring, ie the recording of impacts upon the environment through grazing and trampling. However, he felt this was a positive initiative and not just another statutory 'imposition' since this additional information is of real value to individual Estates and to the Group as a whole in ensuring the sustainability of deer populations and the habitat that supports them.

Scottish Government is also placing a greater emphasis on accountability and a justification for what management is being carried out on individual Estates and within the Group as a whole, and an explanation of why that particular management strategy has been determined over other possible options considered. He highlighted that Scottish Government believes there is obligation on the private sector to communicate to the wider community and that a communication strategy should be in place. The ADMG has recently announced that it will be happy to host sub-domains on the main ADMG website, for each DMG for the uploading of information, ie the publishing of DMP and AGM minutes. This is a convenient method of communication.

Mr Coghill stressed that the DMP exercise should not be seen as a 'job done', but that it should be a platform for the next step and DMGs should look at how they deliver the plan and make it work going forward. He agreed that many of the objectives are for DMG benefit as well as the SNH exercise, and suggested that an action sub-group be formed to drive the plan forward, including information gathering and the audit process. Prof Putman added to this by suggesting an annual audit at the AGM of group actions highlighted in the Action points table at the end of the Plan, to check progress under each of the 14 Public benefit elements required by SG.

Mr Coghill mentioned that there was an SNH-funded programme available from 6 October to end of December 2016 for assistance in DMP delivery.

Mr Smith returned to the subject of habitat monitoring and that it was perceived as an exercise for problem areas rather than a regular monitoring programme as a whole. It is felt that a meeting on habitat monitoring would benefit the group specifically, and could possibly include other DMGs. This would be co-ordinated in collaboration with SNH and was suggested for May 2016. Mr Coghill advised that such exercises usually take the form of an hour's discussion inside before heading out onto the hill, and with a group size of between 6-12 people.

Mr Chetwynd advised that habitat monitoring was being successfully adopted in the Wester Ross and East Sutherland DMG areas.

There is a map of the geographical area with estate boundaries highlighted, for inclusion on the ADMG website. This is currently with SNH.

Finally, the Chairman offered congratulations on behalf of the DMG to Prof Putman for his recent award from the British Deer Society – The Balfour Browne Trophy – which had been awarded for his research on deer and the translation of the results of that applied research into actual deer management.

6. Election of New Chairman

Mr Smith advised that he is to step down as Chairman of the DMG after nine years in the position. He thanked the members of the group for their assistance during that time, and, in particular, Mr Pattinson, for his many years as Treasurer.

Mr Smith reported that Shaun Macdonald had volunteered to stand for election as Chairman (which would now be for a three-year term).

The Chairman therefore proposed Mr Macdonald for Chairman. This was seconded by Mrs Pattinson, and agreed by the DMG members present.

Mr MacDonald took the opportunity to thank Mr and Mrs Smith for their hospitality and good humour over the years, during what had been a challenging time for DMGs. He added that he looks forward to working the community and SNH going forward.

7. Any Other Business

Wester Ross Biosphere

Mary Gibson reported that the nomination form for the proposed biosphere was complete and had been endorsed by both Scottish and UK governments. The nomination will now be submitted to UNESCO for consideration, and a decision is expected in 2016. At that time there can be discussion as to any potential involvement/contribution of the DMG to the project.

Estate Signage

There was discussion on the subject of estate signs. At present there is no overall agreement as to what is required on the signs, other than they should illustrate essential access information. It was agreed that this will be a collaborative exercise, and should be included for discussion at the next meeting. Prof Putman highlighted that, under the public interests element of the DMP, signage would be important in illustrating support of the 'Heading For The Scottish Hills' initiative.

DMP Plans

Prof Putman advised that there is a series of maps to accompany the DMP, but the files are too large to email. He will provide a CD of the maps to the Secretary who can arrange to host them on Dropbox for members' access or print copies for members is preferred.

Deer Management Qualifications (DMQs)

Mr Tollemache mentioned that his three sons were keen to undertake DMQ Level 1 and asked of locations where they could do so. There was discussion between members and a suggestion that a collaborative effort within the group could be made to accommodate those wishing to undertake the DMQs at various levels.

North Strome/Reraig

The question was raised as to whether this property be considered an enclosed deer farm and, therefore, whether membership of the DMG was necessary. In the absence of a representative of the area, it was noted that a fenced area encloses a proportion of the property and that there remain a significant area of open hill ground. While the enclosed area will be used in the future for "put-and-take" hunting, stalking is also carried out on the open hill ground and populations here are continuous with neighbouring Estates. This mixed strategy is fully recorded in the deer Plan and it was considered fully appropriate that Reraig be included as a member.

8. Date of next meeting

The proposed date of the next meeting will be Friday, 20 May 2016. Venue and time to be confirmed.

It was suggested that a Habitat Training Day be hosted the day prior (Thursday, 19 May 2016) at New Kelso. However, confirmation of date and arrangements will be issued in due course under separate cover.