

**SOUTH WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP  
MEETING**

**Friday, 20 May 2016 – Lochcarron Village Hall, Ross-shire, 10:30**

**MINUTES**

**Present:**

Shaun McDonald (Chairman), Diana Jordan (Secretary), David Abraham, Roddy Butcher, Richard Curzon, Sinclair Coghill, Nick Dalgety, Terry Doe, Mary Gibson, Charlie Hill, Willie Lamont, Chris Mackenzie, David Mackenzie, Simon Stewart

**1. Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed those in attendance, in particular Terry Doe attending on behalf of Torridon & Kinlochewe Community Council. He also thanked Sinclair Coghill (SC) for undertaking the Habitat Survey with members of the DMG on Thursday, 19 May at New Kelso, and pointed out that this was a useful tool going forward and such activities should be encouraged.

A lower attendance than previous meetings was noted. This may be a reflection of the amount of involvement/work undertaken by members during the DMP process.

**2. Apologies**

Apologies were received from: Mark Adams, Jim Alexander, Tom Chetwynd, Russell Cooper, Andrew Cope, Kurt Larson, Archie MacLellan, Neil Morrison, Claire Munday, Richard Munday, Gillian Pattinson, Mark Pattinson, Rory Putman, Alison Raeside, Mark Raeside, Philip Smith, Hugh Tollemache, Nicholas Wills, Richard Wills

**3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting – 25 September 2015**

The Chairman asked if there were any amendments or issues in connection with the previous minutes or whether they were a true reflection of the meeting. There being no comment on the minutes, these were accepted.

**4. Matters Arising**

***Deer Management Plan (DMP)***

The Chairman asked if SC (as appointed SNH officer) was happy with progress regarding the DMP, and said it was important for the pressure to be kept on the group.

SC will undertake an assessment of the current DMP, comparing it with the position in 2014, and will prepare a report for the Scottish Government's Rural Affairs Committee by the autumn. The assessment is to be completed by the end of June 2016. Later at the meeting it was decided that this assessment would be held with the Chairman and Secretary on the afternoon of Thursday, 2 June.

SC stressed that the more progress DMGs can show they are making with implementation of their DMPs, the better the outlook will be for such organisation, bearing in mind the 'threat' of change from voluntary to statutory status. DMGs are in a better position when they have a good plan in place (it was noted that the SWRDMG does), and that a DMG shows enthusiasm for such activities at habitat assessments.

## **MSPs**

The Chairman recently hosted MSPs at a meeting prior to the recent election and had asked who from the community members present actually sent emails to their MSPs regarding countryside and agricultural issues – it transpired that not many had done so.

He encouraged those present to find out who their MSP was and to invite them to visit their estates, in order to show progress and engagement, whether it be in deer management or wider agricultural/rural issues.

It was noted that Kate Forbes is the new MSP for the area (originally from Dingwall), and that Rhona Grant MSP is very aware of circumstances and has a good understanding of issues. It was suggested she be invited to the September meeting.

The Secretary will check with Gillian Pattinson as to whether a notice has been made to the Lochcarron Community regarding the DMP and where it could be viewed. It was suggested that notices could also be placed for future DMG meetings.

## **5. Spring Deer Count**

Gillian Pattinson recently circulated deer count figures, but additional figures were received at the meeting as follows:

- Achnashellach (Chris Mackenzie): 146 hinds, 30 calves, 65 stags (it was reported that figures were slowly but steadily increasing).
- Kinloch (Richard Munday): 6 stags, 8 hinds, 1 calf – a total of 15 (all counted on the open hill).

Archie McLellan will be asked to pass the Secretary the deer count figures for Applecross.

The Secretary will update the current spreadsheet and re-circulate to the group in due course.

The Chairman felt that that the DMG should get up to speed with counts and there was discussion as to the best time of year to identify the deer, with counts currently being undertaken in March/April.

A suggestion of an early count (January) was highlighted as potentially skewing figures – i.e. should 50 calves be counted in January, this may have reduced to 25 by March due to bad weather, so would not necessarily be a true reflection of the position. Early counts would only be effective where mortality rates were carefully noted in order to make a comparison between figures.

SC advised that the current count method was a good indicator of recruitment population, but as an overall population count identifier, it is incomplete. He suggested that a helicopter count may be the best way to assemble figures, and these generally take place during the winter months from December to the end of March.

He further advised that population modelling should be embraced as a way to manage the population of deer, and stressed the importance of how count figures should be incorporated into population models. SC suggested that the current DMP is rather vague on population modelling as it looks forward to the next count, rather than reflecting on previous figures.

The Chairman suggested bearing in mind the idea of undertaking a deer count during a period of time when there is good weather to provide figures at that point in time, rather than restricting a count to a set day/time when the weather is poor and the count will not necessarily yield clear results. Doing so may also help an owner to build knowledge of his estate.

## **6. Cull Returns**

SNH Deer Cull Returns will have been received via post in the past few days, and it was stressed that these should be completed and returned to SNH as soon as possible to avoid reminders after the deadline of 18 June 216.

The Chairman asked that every estate provide details of their cull figures to the Secretary for collation on behalf of the DMG, which is required for submission to ADMG to ascertain the DMG's ADMG subscription for the coming year.

SC advised that some groups collate returns for their own reference so that they have illustrative data for their estates over 5 years which can be used to show local variations. This is something that the Secretary can collate going forward.

## **7. Finances**

The DMG accounts had been provided by the Treasurer prior to the meeting and were circulated to those present and summarised by the Chairman in the Treasurer's absence. The summary is appended to the minutes for reference.

The Chairman advised that now that the DMP was in place and paid for (with monies promptly received from SNH) there should be some more stability in the DMG's finances going forward.

The Chairman remains in negotiations with Kirkton Woodlands and North Strome (Reraig) regarding their membership of the DMG.

The balance of the accounts is low at present, but it is felt that a clearer position of the finances will be evident at the September meeting, with a suggestion that a budget be put in place in order to manage future finances.

In terms of membership fees, it was felt that a flat rate per estate should remain in place rather than reverting to a fee based upon the 5 year average of stags culled per estate (as used by some DMGs).

Willie Lamont advised that the FCS has up to £500 allocated to each DMG as contribution towards Deer Management Plan, and this could be invoiced for. The Secretary is to check the position as to whether a contribution from FCS had been applied for in relation to the DMP.

SC advised that there will be the potential for other funding available to the DMGs should they wish to apply for it. He highlighted the agri-environment schemes via SRDP whereby a 50% contribution can be granted for facilitating the costs involved in delivering DMP commitments, such as woodland protection, designated sites monitoring/improvements, for example. This could also include information gathering and Habitat Impact Assessments (HIA). Funding would be allocated in three five-year intervals, but he stressed that the remaining 50% of total costs would fall to the DMG.

It was suggested that an application could be made in respect of utilising helicopter counts for the DMG's annual deer counts. SC can check the costings from SNH for this service, but gave an example figure of £30,000. The Chairman calculated that on the basis of incurring the cost of hill-counts, it is possible that the annual membership per estate could rise from £60 to £231.

The Secretary will investigate what agri-environment schemes/funding may be available and suitable for accessing by the DMG.

The Chairman advised that he is due to speak to Christine Mackenzie of Kirkton Woodland regarding DMG membership, and whilst doing so he will also ask her about any funding applications the organisation has made, including for fencing of their woodlands.

## **8. Any Other Business**

### ***Designated Sites***

Richard Curzon queried the mention of designated sites in the previous minutes. It was confirmed that this related to site condition monitoring and should be seen as an ongoing process, with continuing programmes of monitoring of designated sites taking place, with reporting back to the relevant estate or group.

### ***DMP***

It was asked at the recent ADMG regional meeting whether the DMG's DMP had been signed off. This was confirmed, in as much as the DMP had been completed and funds released by SNH. A post-completion assessment of the DMP will take place with SC. He will meet with the Chairman and Secretary to undertake the assessment and feedback will be provided following the assessment highlighting areas identified in need of attention and expectations upon the group to keep the plan progressive and proactive.

SC stressed the importance of being proactive and maintaining momentum now that the DMP is in place. The DMG should keep this in motion by ongoing review of the plan and its action points, delivering on commitments, and the updating of plans. It should not just be placed on a shelf until the next review.

There are circa 14 areas of the DMP which SNH look at when carrying out its assessment. These include designated sites (are they in favourable condition, and if not, what is proposed for future improvement of that site and ongoing monitoring, and taking ownership for condition of such sites is key), woodland creation, existing native woodland condition, and peatland restoration.

Mary Gibson (MG) pointed out that getting on top of population models and deer counts will be helpful as all information will assist good habitat assessment.

It is important that the DMG is doing what is expected of it, gathering and collating information and updating the plan where required).

The Chairman felt it would be useful to issue a briefing note by way of feedback to the DMG following the assessment meeting with SNH.

There was discussion about meetings of other local related organisations and involvement of, and implications upon, associated DMG members. The group was advised that RC had not only *not* been invited to a meeting which affected Tullich (in connection with the Rassal Ashwood), but had also been told that he should not attend. It was felt that if an issue affects an owner's ground then he has a right to be present at a meeting to represent his interests.

It was decided that the Deer Management Plan should be included in all future DMG meeting agendas for discussion and review.

### ***Biosphere***

MG reported that Wester Ross had now received its status as a UNESCO biosphere. This is a world-class accolade, illustrating the area as a world heritage site of natural heritage value and sustainability at a local level. The biosphere area stretches from Achiltibuie to Kyle of Lochalsh to Garve.

The biosphere group has only recently had its first meeting and is in the early stages of developing a plan, setting out its governance and deciding upon its series of projects and purpose. However, MG stressed that DMGs sit well within the ethos of the biosphere in terms of sustainability and natural value.

MG was encouraged to provide updates/news regarding the biosphere to the DMG at any time, either by circulating news via the Secretary or putting the topic on the agenda of future DMG meetings.

## **9. Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting was provisionally diarised for Friday, 30 September 2016, at Lochcarron Hall. *[Post-meeting note: Due to Lochcarron Hall being unavailable on 30 September, a new date of Friday, 23 September 2016 is proposed]*

### **Appended Documents:**

- *Accounts Summary*