

NORTHERN DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

Summary Minutes of the Meeting on 9th May 2019 at Kildonan Hall

Present: Chair - Howard Palmer (Latheronwheel West), Treasurer - Anson MacAuslan (Langwell & Braemore), Secretary – Helen MacIntyre, SNH – Holly Deary & Debbie Skinner, Tom Chetwynd – ADMG, representatives from: Langwell, Braemore, Achentoul, RSPB, Dunbeath, Glutt, Strathmore, Braehour & Backlass, Shurrery, Bighouse, Skelpick & Rhifail, Badanloch, Torrish, Number One Holding, Suisgill, Achkeepster, Fountains Forestry, Forest and Land Scotland.

Apologies: Dalnawillan & Rumsdale, Strathy, Syre, SGRPID, Sandside, Strathmore & Broubster Forests, Armadale Farm

- 1. Welcome and Apologies** - The Chairman welcomed everyone and opened the meeting at 2.30pm.
- 2. Approval of Minutes of Meeting 28th August 2018 and matters arising.** – Approved with no matters arising.

3. Chairman's Report – Howard Palmer

It has been a busy 6 months, working hard to meet SNH's objectives for deer groups. This morning the group had its 2019 SNH assessment. We have been playing catch-up and are towards the bottom end of all the deer groups with lots of work still to be done to reach the standard expected. Thanks to Anson and the new secretary Helen for work done, plus the executive committee which met in November and helped move on a plan for the group.

Thank you for all those attending the meeting. If you can encourage others to come along please do. Please approach sub-group reps if you have any issues you would like addressed (North – James May; South 1 & West 2 – Anson MacAuslan; South 2 – Howard Palmer; West 1 – George Lopes; West 1 & North – Toby Ward; North, West 2, South 1 & 2 – Claire Foot-Turner).

A draft action plan has been written. The original plan was written by Putman at a cost of over £40k, half paid for by the group, half by SNH. The action plan will be used over the next few years to guide and monitor progress.

We had a practice assessment done by Victor Clements on behalf of the Association of Deer Management Groups last August. The SNH assessment today produced several upgrades from ambers to greens, but we still have some ambers and reds. The group will review all these on at least an annual basis.

4. Treasurer's Report – Anson MacAuslan

There are some outstanding subs to come in and an invoice to pay for secretarial work.

TMT asked if there was SNH funding for ongoing updates to DMPs. HD explained that there is not any more funding, they were one-off grants.

HP is hopeful that Putman's report can continue to form the basis for future updates of DMP. HD described that the updating of action plans on a six-monthly basis is what SNH are looking at. HP suggested that the group considers starting to build up funds.

DM asked about funding future helicopter counts. SNH hope to do a helicopter count of Northern DMG next year. HD said 100% funded SNH counts are looking less and less likely for the future.

5. Culls and counts

Culls

Some members commented on low calving rates, with 3 out of 11 suitable hinds pregnant. It was a mild winter with low mortality. HP asked if we should include calving rates/pregnancy information in cull returns. This helps with looking at deer welfare.

Some feel that we are culling too many stags for the number of knobbers counted, but there may be stags missed in the count due to porous forestry fencing allowing them to hide where they can't be counted during the relevant period of the count; they emerge during the Rut. It was suggested that perhaps stag targets should be reduced as some members have noticed they are not seeing many older stags. It was noted that deer shot on crofts are not being reported to the group and that this would be useful information to have.

Helicopter counts were discussed, including points on how many more deer are counted than with foot counts – some suggested 20% more, but it can vary for different DMGs. Using drones for counting was also discussed, and HD said in the longer term they will most likely be useful but at the moment it is difficult as there can be licencing issues. TC said drones can have welfare issues due to disturbing the deer. The use of fixed wing planes at 500 ft is being explored – they cost £250 per hour rather than several thousand for helicopters. SNH are questioning their use – they are good for looking at deer distribution but not so good for individual numbers. Drones take thousands of photos so there is a data management issue to analyse them. Satellites will be more likely to be useful in the near future than drones.

Group foot count 2019

The count shows fewer stags than hinds in all sub-groups except south 1. South 1 have been reducing hind numbers so there will be fewer stags coming in. Should we reduce stag targets by 10%? TC pointed out that Rossal Forest (in the neighbouring DMG) are culling 50 stags a year and they are not from the hinds in their forest, so these could be coming off Northern DMG open range. Some southern members are continuing with reduction culls to improve habitat condition due to unacceptable impacts. Neighbouring count numbers don't seem to be affected, but if there are impacts please get in touch.

Recruitment counts should be done late April after winter mortality has finished. Do a sample count of two or three groups of hinds and calves. **Action:** HM to ask group members for this in May/June, including number of hinds it is based on.

Population modelling

Draft population models have been drawn up for each sub-group. The 'target populations' are just an example to start off with. Each sub-group needs to decide what their targets are, depending on their cull requirements and other objectives, such as acceptable impacts on habitats. It was discussed whether there are too many sub-groups.

Deer mortality from train strikes should be investigated and included in the models where possible. There is data available online.

6. Group Deer Management Plan

A draft Working Plan has been circulated to the group. It contains a list of strategic objectives for the group to work towards.

Priority Actions – areas for improvement with regards to SNH's objectives.

i) Counting methods in woodland – Members should consider dung counting. Fountains Forestry estimate around 500 deer in their forestry, which move out of the forestry in the rut. HD said that is potentially a significant number of deer not being incorporated into deer models.

ii) Habitat Impact Assessment – the group is not delivering on this. Members need a clear protocol for sampling a number of plots over up to 3 year cycle. It is a major priority for assessing deer impacts on habitats. We can't

show that the group understands the issue or is trained to carry it out. The SNH grant of £1800 will be spent on getting Victor Clements to do a report on a plan for the group. Best Practice is 30 plots per habitat type per estate, but doing it on a landscape scale means you can reduce this to an extent. Dunbeath & Glutt have been doing it for 3 years, but are unsure what to do with the data. HD said the group needs to use the information for their own needs. TC can share the HIA experiences of East Sutherland DMG.

iii) Native woodland – Members need to look at maps from the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland and decide if impacts have changed since the survey was done in 2013.

iv) Peatland restoration – Members will report to secretary to collate.

v) Public access – We should promote positive action. Where there are tensions/issues, please bring up within DMG for discussion.

vi) Economic benefits/costs – If the group shares aggregated figures this helps show the benefits to the local economy of deer management. TC has done a quick bit of calculation and estimates annual income of £145k+ from venison, £248k for stalking, giving estimated total of £400-460k per year. For expenditure, we need to make some assumptions and come up with estimates. It is likely that deer management runs at a deficit.

7. SNH Update & 2019 Assessment

By mid-May, all DMGs will have been assessed. A report will be written which includes the 2019 assessments and other information and will be given to Scottish Government in September. Progress from the assessments in 2016 has been good across the groups, some groups more than others. Northern DMG will likely be in the lower end of assessments but there has been good progress since 2016. There is plenty of work to do on some aspects, such as HIA, population modelling. SNH is happy to support the executive committee if they need any advice. The 2016 assessment was looking at planning. 2019 is looking at actions being put in place from the plan.

8. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report

Tom Chetwynd prepared the following report, though there was not time for him to read it all at the meeting.

Deer Review by Scottish Government:

- ECCLR Committee and SNH reported to the Cabinet Secretary in 2017 and the Government noted that progress had been made, but significant additional effort is required by the sector.
- DWG - independent group appointed by Scottish Ministers in October 2017 to recommend changes to ensure effective deer management in Scotland that safeguards public interests and promotes the sustainable management of wild deer.
- DWG is due to report in Autumn 2019, around the same time as the report by SNH on 2019 Assessment.
- If the review does not find that sufficient progress has been made with the objectives they have identified, they have made it clear that they would have no alternative but to consider fundamental changes to the framework for deer management in Scotland.

ADMG Involvement in Review:

- ADMG is committed to the welfare of deer and their habitat through sustainable management practices and protecting employment and rural communities where deer management is a major economic land use.
- Voluntary organisation operating in a voluntary system promoting “Principles of Collaboration”
- Have been the interface between SG and the deer managements sector, particularly open range red deer.
- Active members of Deer Management Round Table, National Access Forum, Scottish Venison Partnership, SQWV, and others within the land management sector.

- Lobbying Scottish Government (SG) and SNH to ensure that all in the deer management sector receive a fair deal out of the 2019 assessment. Have been in continuous communication with SNH to ensure that DMGs are assessed fairly and reasonably under the Assessment process.
- Hold workshops to provide an opportunity for DMGs to come up to the standards expected by SG and voice their concerns on issues relating to deer management, particularly on how the reviews are being undertaken.
- Provided DMGs with significant assistance, most notably with Health Checks in 2018 which has helped many DMGs make significant progress and coming up to standard expected by SG in the 2019 Assessment.
- Research by ADMG has shown that some data collection and analysis as part of the Native Woodland Survey Scotland was flawed and many of the native woodlands are in significantly better condition than identified.
- On the Steering Group for Best Practice along with SNH, BDS, SGA, FLS and have been a driving force in getting this initiative back up the agenda.
- There are many who have no confidence in the deer management sector and this is now continuously broadcast by other agencies and groups such as Scottish Wildlife Trust and was reflected in the mis-quoted headline in The Times last week which referred to a UN report on deer and the damage that they do to peat.
- Will be having further meetings with Cab Sec, particularly following the 2019 Assessment and DWG reports.
- There is likely to be a further meeting in London to provide an opportunity for owners in the south to catch up with ADMG directly
- In summary, ADMG recognise that the voluntary system works well, and that it is in no-one's interest to allow a statutory system of deer management to be implement across Scotland.

Sporting rates

- Part of the SLE Working Group throughout.
- Many appeals led by main agents who are also part of that group. Highland appeals in December carried over and assessments being negotiated informally and being settled pre-appeal based on evidence.
- Smaller properties where quantum doesn't apply in the region of 80p - £1/ha or 50% of NRV proposed by SA in 2017. 50p/ha on larger properties where quantum does apply.
- Small Business Rates Relief likely to remain until next review in 2022 but not to be relied upon long term.

Survey of Sporting Rents (Red Deer) 2018

- Last undertaken in 2011. Sponsored by Knight Frank and will assess the current levels of rent for a range of different stalking options and provide the sector with valuable information about stalking rents in general.
- Interim Report: 46 returns covering 1.2m acres or 490k ha.
- Stags with stalker and no ghillie – average £478 with range £300 – 790 (2011 - £377)
- Stags with stalker and ghillie - £557 with range £400 – 1,000 (2011 - £503)
- Stags with stalker and 2 ghillies - £670 with range £540 – 864
- Hinds with stalker - £272 per day with range £100 – 400

2017 – 18 Cull: 75,306 red deer

ADMG and SNH – economic impact of deer management at DMG scale:

- Recognised in legislation that economic and social values are equal to environmental – assess changes in management practice
- Linked to the cost of building capacity in DMGs. Most DMGs now have some sort of Facilitator service.

Regulation in Deer Management

- Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 – Function of SNH, management of deer, offences, licensing of venison dealers.
- Wildlife & Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 - Code of Practice on Deer Management – practical guidance on deer management.
- Wild Deer Best Practice Guidance – practical guidance on deer management.

- Wild Game Guide – Food Standards Scotland – information on hygiene regulations for food business that supply wild game and for people who supply it in fur as small quantities of wild game meat – April 2018.
- Supply in-fur to AGHE - required to register as a food business with Local Authority and comply with the general hygiene requirements for primary producers. This includes any vehicle used when supplying an AGHE and the game larder, if you use it to store game before it goes to an AGHE as well as the specific provisions of Regulation 853/2004 that apply to the initial handling of wild game intended for subsequent supply to an AGHE.
- Supply processed to final consumer - required to register with your Local Authority as a food business under Regulation (EC) No. 852/2004. 'You are required to comply with the general hygiene requirements;' You must have in place a food safety management procedure based on HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) principles. Please note – the requirements are adapted where private dwelling houses or temporary/moveable premises are being used. Advice can be sought from your Local Authority during registration.
- Trained Hunter needs to be present – DMQ Level 1 still voluntary but Level 1 & 2 encouraged by all DMGs.

9. Any Other Competent Business

There will be a memorial held for John Campbell-Smith's father at 12pm on 20th July at Number One Holding.

Malcolm Richardson (Bighouse) will be reporting culls and counts for Armadale Estate in future.

Sub-group meetings should be held before group meetings and then the representatives can report at the group meeting. Since RSPB are in several sub-groups the meetings should be held at different times. The executive committee members will contact their sub-group members to arrange meetings.

TC suggested that Northern DMG should have a Wildfire Plan. **Action:** TC to liaise with HM on this.

10. Date of Next Meeting – 2.30pm on Thursday 22nd August 2019 at Kildonan Hall.