

Northern Deer Management Group

Minutes of the Meeting on Thursday 18th March 2021 at 2.30pm by online Zoom call

Present: Chair - Howard Palmer (HP) (Latheronwheel West), Treasurer - Anson MacAuslan (AM) (Langwell & Braemore), Secretary – Helen MacIntyre (HM), Holly Deary (HD) – NatureScot, Richard Cooke (RC) & Tom Chetwynd (TC) – ADMG, representatives from: Achentoul, Badanloch, Bighouse, Braehour & Backlass, Dunbeath & Glutt, Fountain Forestry, RSPB, Shurrery, Skelpick, Suisgill.

Apologies: FLS, SSE Strathy North & South.

1. Welcome and apologies. HP welcomed everyone to the meeting, and a special welcome to Richard Cooke, Chair of the Association of Deer Management Groups. See above for apologies.

2. Approval of Minutes of Meeting 27th August 2020 and matters arising
No matters arising. Proposed by JN, seconded by HP, minutes approved.

3. Chairman's Report – Howard Palmer

It has been a difficult time over the past 12 months. Thanks to Anson and Helen for all their work. We have been gathering statistics and are in the process of updating the group's Deer Management Plan. We haven't managed to get a full group foot count this year, though we have done well over past years at this. Unfortunately the count was incomplete in South sub-group 2 due to the weather. Culls over the last year have been close to our targets, with variations in different sub-groups, and these targets were significantly higher than the previous year's culls. There was a discussion on whether both south sub-groups should count again. Some members were willing, others not.

4. Treasurer's Report

The report has been circulated in advance. HP said the majority of group income is spent on ADMG subs. He believes secretarial costs are good value. There are a few small landholdings that do not get involved in the group. AM has tried to encourage people to take part and pay subs, but if people don't want to be members then we cannot force them. However, it is a small percentage of the total group area. HP proposed that the treasurer's report be approved, TW seconded. Report approved.

5. Culls and Counts

a. Results of hind cull 2020-21 – Proposed hind cull was 1268 for the group (which included a few calves) and the actual hind cull was 1206 (figure updated since the meeting). Langwell/Braemore shot around 50% of the hinds they counted last year, and were hoping that was the last of their reduction cull, but going on this year's count they may need to continue. HP asked about West 1. GL said they shoot a lot of deer that come in from the west that aren't in this count. When the rut comes they are swarming with stags but don't shoot that many. HP said his feeling is that there are more deer around. TMT said they are seeing slightly more deer than usual and will marginally increase their culls. With Langwell shooting hard, TMT sees more deer coming on to his ground. BL said they increased their hind cull last year, and if they see the deer staying on their ground they will shoot the deer they need to. Suisgill is also looking for reduction cull since they have seen more than they'd like in this year's count. JN is a bit concerned about all the extra culling by neighbours and won't make a decision yet on cull targets.

b. Proposed stag cull for 2021 – HM hasn't had all the figures in yet. **Action:** HM to ask for stag targets.

c. Group foot count 2021 – Not all properties counted on the same day as their neighbours, which is not ideal. South sub-groups had to delay their count twice due to unsuitable conditions, and on the third attempt most properties counted but three were still not able to due to high rivers.

d. Population modelling -

South sub-group 1 had a very high hind count – 600 over the number predicted by the population model. However, limited conclusions can be drawn since we don't have count figures for South sub-group 2 and there is movement of both stags and hinds between these two sub-groups.

South sub-group 2 – Even without this year's count, the model implies a gradually increasing population at current cull levels.

Whole group model – if you look at the predicted versus counted spring populations for each year, there is quite a variation in figures, implying that the assumptions in the model may be incorrect or there are deer moving in and out of the group boundaries or being missed in counts because they are sheltering in forestry, affecting population numbers. AM pointed out there could be a fair number of deer coming out of felled forestry. HD said it is very helpful to have the models.

CR explained that the railway fence doesn't stop the deer but hinders them. Some will jump it. JN said it is the worst of both worlds - once they are in the fence they panic when a train comes along and this causes greater mortality. They tried to get Network Rail to reduce the fence height but to no avail. NatureScot have also had discussions with Network Rail on their fence specifications across the country. HD suggests collecting mortality figures would help, but there is not much else we can do at the moment. TC explained we can request the train strike data in an FOI request, as they do for East Sutherland DMG. They have seen an increase in the last three years. CR explained that they have changed the rails and now the deer can't hear the train coming apart from the engine noise. **Action:** TC to send FOI template to HM.

6. Habitat Impact Assessments

Maps of random HIA plots will be sent out to group members so they can use them if they wish. Any HIA data collected during HIAs can be sent to the group secretary who will collate and map it, along with the data collected by Victor Clements. **Action:** HM to send out HIA plot maps.

Group training cannot currently go ahead, but Anson is happy to hold a group training day once allowed. There are ADMG videos online demonstrating how to do HIA. www.deer-management.co.uk/general-info/tutorials/

HD said most groups are further ahead with doing HIAs than Northern. GL said Skelpick will be doing HIAs from now on. RC explained we have been fortunate to have a voluntary deer management system for the past decade. HIA data is important for monitoring change and showing if you are managing your deer sustainably. We are awaiting the government response to the DWG report, and there is a strong likelihood we will move towards a top down method of management, with NatureScot coming along to meetings to tell us what we need to cull. ADMG can't defend the DMGs unless they have a vigorous approach to deer management planning and HIAs. (Since the meeting, the Scottish Government response to the DWG report has accepted a number of recommendations which could be seen as moving towards a more statutory system, like tasking NatureScot with developing proposals for a cull approval system.)

7. Group Deer Management Plan

a. Draft Working Plan - Sections on population modelling and HIAs are being prepared.

b. Priority Actions – HIAs. HD said Victor's report should be reinvigorated. NDMG should be clearer on what is expected of members. **Action:** HP to talk to HM about this.

8. NatureScot Update

HD explained that they recognise that the impacts of Covid have been challenging for all groups. It is great to see that the group has managed to maintain and deliver its hind cull. Other groups have generally been within 10-20% of targets.

In terms of areas that came up in the assessment of Northern DMG, HIAs and population modelling were key areas. She is glad to see more work on the population models and hopes that HIA plans can move forward.

NatureScot are encouraging groups to consider where they can make contributions to climate change objectives through nature based solutions, with opportunities for funding of peatland restoration and also woodland creation. HD encourages individuals to explore these.

9. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report

ADMG awaits the Scottish Government response to the Deer Working Group report. ADMG's view is that it is a mixed bag. Their response letter to the Cabinet Secretary is on their website. ADMG felt the SNH 2019 report was a fair representation of the sector.

The venison market has had a very difficult time this year. Indications are that the retail sector has operated well, but it has had a major blow in the restaurant and export trade.

Non-lead ammunition – There is a requirement coming from the market to drop lead due to food safety concerns. Those exporting to Europe will need to take this on board. It is not banned yet but is likely to be soon.

Wild Game Guide – A new guide is being produced by the Food Standards Association. It should include legal and safety requirements for those taking venison to market.

Trophy export guidance - Trophies to be exported to the EU now need a health certificate signed off by vet or regulatory body. The BASC guidance can be found on the ADMG website.

10. Any Other Competent Business

Howard is stepping down at the next meeting so we need a successor as Chair.

TW asked if AM is volunteering to do some training in HIA? AM said yes he can organise something again.

Fires – TW said they have had two fires already. AM explained that, after long discussions with the Fire Brigade, it was agreed that rather than being excluded from helping with fires they will let volunteers help. John Donaldson from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service was interested in getting a register together of equipment kept locally. GL said he has a fogging unit and two leaf blowers. AM thinks as a group we should have a Fire Plan. TW said estates are reluctant to give the Fire Brigade their information. GL said we should also have a record of fires we have had in the group. RC said there are a number of estate fire plans doing the same thing. As the debate about muirburn continues this is ever more important. He suggested having a rep from the Fire Brigade to the group on a regular basis. AM has a template of equipment owned that he could circulate. **Action:** HM to draw up a Fire Plan and register of equipment. HP asked HD about muirburn on SSSIs to prevent wildfires.

Action: HD to check the latest and let us know.

11. Date of Next Meeting - 2.30pm Friday 20th August at Kildonan Hall.