

Northern Deer Management Group

Minutes of the Meeting on Friday 6th May 2022 at 2.30pm at Kildonan Hall

Present: Chair – Diana Darwall (DD) (Suisgill), Secretary – Helen MacIntyre (HM), Holly Deary (HD) – NatureScot, Tom Chetwynd (TC) – ADMG, Prof Steven Andrews – Flow Country World Heritage Project Co-ordinator, Highland Council (SA), representatives from: Achentoul, Badanloch, Bighouse, Braehour & Backlass, Fountain Forestry, RSPB, Shurrery, Skelpick, SSE Strathy North & South, Strathmore, Suisgill, Torrish.

Apologies:, Achkeepster, Dunbeath & Glutt, FLS, Treasurer - Anson MacAuslan (AM) (Langwell & Braemore).

1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone, including some joining the meeting via Zoom.

2. Flow Country World Heritage site - proposed boundary presentation – Prof. Steven Andrews

Professor Andrews gave a presentation on the proposed boundary of the World Heritage site. He explained that they have tried to include as many stakeholders as possible. They are still in consultation on the boundary, management plan etc. and looking to submit the bid end of 2022. They should know UNESCO's decision by mid 2024.

It was asked if World Heritage status would add more protection. SA explained that it wouldn't. It's about the recognition of what has been done and what is working and the global significance.

It was asked what are the advantages apart from venison marketing and tourism. SA said it's what you make of it. It could be civic pride, economic advantages, tourists spending more time in the area rather than whizzing round the NC500. E.g. RSPB take people out on tours of the Flow Country.

It was asked if this area has the infrastructure to deal with extra visitors. What are Highland Council going to do to prepare for this? SA thinks there is an opportunity whilst waiting for the decision. They have already tendered for a study to look into this issue, which should start later this year.

One member commented that they have seen the good and the bad of the NC500, and this area is mostly away from this road, but he is concerned that if you encourage more visitors it will have a negative impact on the Flow Country. Another member is concerned about access impacting on deer management activities. SA said responsible access is key to this, so visitor management is vital. They recognise that this is a living landscape, and it's about balancing this to gain the benefits of visitors.

A member asked if SA has had discussions with the crofters, who will be there forever. Where his family are in Dartmoor, the Government allowing access has meant it has been ruined. The local bogs are very dangerous places for people who don't know about them. If you fall in there is no bottom and you would struggle to get out. When the SSSIs were brought in about 10 years ago, landowners were paid to look after them, but now there is no funding for this so we look after it at our own cost. He is all in favour of access but thinks the wildlife will not be better off. SA said the head of the steering group is a crofter so they have certainly been considered. He thinks it is less likely to be overrun than Dartmoor, but accepts this is a serious point and should not be underestimated. He thinks that the vastness of the area and the small extra number of visitors is likely to have little impact.

One member said land managers have faced increasing demands on how to manage their land. Will the WH status impose an additional level of bureaucracy? SA thinks it comes back to the existing protection, which will still lie with those, so this is not extra on top, but just recognising what is being done well.

3. Approval of Minutes of Meeting 20th August 2021 and matters arising

HM explained that Armadale Farm have been in touch with their forestry neighbour and are looking at deer fencing to prevent further problems with incoming deer. HD has had a couple of site visits in that area after requests for OOS licences. NS may take a thermal into that area. Strathnaver have had agricultural damage in this area due to growing deer numbers.

HM asked if access to RSPB Knockfin has been resolved. RSPB said yes, they are just about to sign an agreement.

HM will be contacting everyone shortly for information to go in the fire plan.

Minutes were approved.

4. Chairperson's Report – Diana Darwall

DD welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming this afternoon. Particular thanks to Helen MacIntyre our secretary and Anson MacAuslan our Treasurer.

It is important we continue to work together to manage our deer since they move across boundaries. We really need to strive to make sure all landholdings within each sub-group count on the same day. Across the group, counts were taken between the 28th February and 7th March this year and one member was unable to make the count at short notice. Please can the west sub-groups make sure to contact each other in advance to arrange the date.

Peatlands within the group are increasingly coming under the spotlight with the climate and biodiversity crises moving higher up the Scottish Government's agenda, and the bid for World Heritage Status for the Flow Country potentially bringing more attention on the area. It is important that we are able to show as a group that we are monitoring our deer numbers and the impacts on our habitats. NatureScot have just this morning taken a group for HIA training, but it is important that as a group we make an effort to commission more thorough environment assessments. Several estates have recently had these done and have shared the information with the group. They are costly, but they should be regarded as an investment, as they can assist with decisions on grant applications for restoring peatlands, tree planting and carbon credits. Nature Scot are still working out how they will implement many of the recommendations from the Deer Working Group Report of 2019, and this is likely to include greater regulation such as a cull approval system, an upper limit of 10 deer per square kilometre, changes to closed seasons and many others. From this year's recent count our group has an average of 6.8 over the entire group. Lorna Slater, Green Party MSP, now has the responsibility for deer, so we will have to see where her priorities lie.

Anson happy to talk to anyone about peatland restoration, which they have done on Langwell & Braemore. DS said RSPB is looking to recruit an advisory officer to work out of their Forsinard office, helping to put together peatland and AECS applications, and happy to help local landowners with their applications.

5. Treasurer's Report

The report has been circulated. All outstanding debts have now been settled.

Number One Holding has left the group. Fountains Forestry have also said they wish to leave the group. However, the owners of some of the landholdings they manage may still want to be in the group, such as SSE

Strathy North.

6. Culls and Counts

a. Results of hind cull 2021-22 – Thank you to everyone for sending in their cull returns. Please try to get them in as soon as possible so the figures can be analysed. There is some concern over out of season culls at FLS Braehour, which is not deer fenced.

b. Proposed stag cull for 2022 – Some figures are still to come in. **Action:** HM to send a reminder.

c. Group foot count 2022 – We had a good turnout this year, thank you to everyone who took part. One member commented that they had very low mortality this year. HM suggested that next year all members should count on the same day due to movements of deer between sub-groups. **Action:** to discuss further at the next meeting.

d. Population modelling – TC commented that at the last meeting he said we may have a few more hinds than we are counting. He has used the figures in his population model, his key observations are: stags may have been overcounted in 2017 by up to 700, and hinds undercounted. Mortality levels are likely realistic. Calving rate may be as high as 38%, higher than those we are counting. The group is possibly losing up to 200 stags a year, maybe culled in crofts. Hind figures are possibly creeping up, and this will push stags out to other areas.

e. Helicopter count – HD said Northern are on the count program, but are not a priority area. NS need 50% co-funding from groups for counts to happen – up to £40k for our group. The counts help recalibrate population models. One member asked about drone counting. HD said yes drone counting is getting more promising, but more for discrete smaller areas such as woodlands just now. You have to have line of sight of the drone and so DMG scale is not suitable at the moment. Satellite imaging is perhaps further behind than drones.

One member said they count regularly throughout the year to make their counting more accurate. Their stags only vary by 18 stags and 22 hinds over the year. HD said each member will have a view on the level of confidence in their count, and hence the confidence in a collaborative cull plan and population.

HM asked that if HIAs show impacts are low then do we still need to count? HD said if you are trying to balance the environmental and sporting objectives then it is still important to know how many deer you have.

One member wondered why NS do not fine or make life difficult for those who do not take part in the group. HD said in terms of legislation and NS's mandate, if there was an issue on an individual landholding scale they can intervene, but they have no power to force collaboration.

There was a discussion about increased deer numbers in Strathnaver. HD said the area west of the Naver is of concern to them and is in their focus. TC said, as Chair of NW Sutherland DMG, they are seeing deer moving around a lot more than they have seen before, and he sees this in Northern's population model. **Action:** meeting of properties around the Naver.

7. Habitat Impact Assessments

The HIA map circulated shows landholdings who are monitoring their impacts. Suisgill have actually started assessing their habitats so HM will update the map. Since the HIA training this morning there should be more landholdings taking it up.

RSPB will submit HIA data soon for Forsinard East, where impacts are low.

Skelpick has a company monitoring across all their land (except crofted areas), and this shows the habitat is good every year.

8. Group Deer Management Plan

The draft Working Plan will be updated with the recent population model and HIA information.

Priority actions include: a Fire Plan, Peatland monitoring and restoration.

9. NatureScot Update – Holly Deary

Scottish Government is looking at the future of deer management in relation to the climate and biodiversity crises. They have set up a Strategic Deer Board to help take forward the recommendations of the DWG report. One focus is on the legislation side. Another is on the incentive side of things. For the regulatory side, they will look at how NS alongside Scottish Forestry can make best use of their powers and what priority programs to take forward.

The maximum density of 10 deer per sq km is a useful proxy, but NS will expect some habitats to be impacted differently so they will continue to take an impact-led approach. They will use the density to identify broad areas, but then drill down to look at local impacts.

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy includes targets of no more lost biodiversity by 2030 and by 2045 restoring habitats.

Trialling counting methods – drones and satellites – has shown they are operationally not quite there yet.

HIAs are useful to look at the detailed impacts at estate level.

10. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report – Tom Chetwynd

Report circulated separately.

DD asked why is there concern over lead bullets? TC said research has shown that lead can fracture and contaminate the meat.

GW asked is the only option copper? TC said no, not just copper, but more and more are moving to copper.

GL thinks the existing ADMG logo is great. The ponies are part of our heritage. Argos leave tracks and use fuel to run.

11. Any Other Competent Business

We have a new FLS contact for Braehour Forest.

One member said he has been using non-lead ammo for years. He suggests you don't buy 100s until you are sure what works for your rifle. Non-lead stuff will evolve over time.

12. Date of Next Meeting

A date of Thursday 18th August was set. The meeting will be held at 2.30pm at Kildonan Hall.