

WKDMG Minutes of Meeting 28 June 2021 at 12:00.

Venue: Inverie Hall and virtually via Zoom.

Present: Rupert Soames (RS), Jim Brown (JB), David Fergusson (DF), Cathy Mayne (CM), Iain Biggart (IB), Grant Holdroyd (GH)

Virtually: Michael Laing (ML), Christophe Henkel (CH), Andrew MacMaster (AMacM), Ally MacAskill, David Balharry (DB), Fred Rous, Rick Rohde, Luise Janniche, Lachie, Elisabeth van Basten Batenburg (EvBB).

1. Apologies

None received.

2. Minutes of last meeting

Approved.

3. Reports from the Chair and the Treasurer; report from NatureScot

Treasury report – current balance is £4,221 with liabilities of £2,450 for a loan by the Chair, and approximately £1,200 for work by the Secretary to date (including the current meeting and associated work). This leaves a balance of approximately £570 for the rest of the year. Outstanding membership fees from Loch Hournhead would increase that to almost £1,000 if the loan to Rupert were to be repaid at the present time. Finance spreadsheet attached.

Proposed that half the loan to RS be paid, which will ensure some leeway for the rest of the year. RS – hope that subs may be reduced in due course, in 1-2 years' time. Agreed.

Action – review subs in 12 months' time.

Action – RS to be repaid half loan, CM to submit invoice for work done to date in 2021.

4. Deer management – count, cull and population model

Foot count and helicopter count. Please see attached paper by the Chair; spreadsheets of count data are available on request.

Population model – please see the updated model and cull recommendations in attached spreadsheet.

RS – two counts taken place. JB and RS have kept all informed of analysis of the differences between the counts. JB – good collaborative foot count in mainly good conditions. Helicopter count 2-3 weeks later returned 25% less. Looked at splitting the difference between the two counts but there were issues with that, with the bulk of the differences in numbers being hinds and calves in the east and some differences in stag numbers in the west, so migration of animals likely. Heli count almost certainly missed some deer and there is a chance the foot count double counted some. The helicopter count is being used as a starting point, since it includes the numbers from the eastern group. See how things work out next year and adjust as required.

CH – thanks to all that took part and the work on analysis. Happy to use the helicopter count as the latest information.

DB – please can we put down a marker, it is always a challenge to count deer. For JMT, not managing things by numbers but more by habitat response. RS – attempting to do the same across the DMG. Latest HIA work is now being collated. Deer incursion in the past winter has had quite a severe impact on the habitat on Camusrory, which reinforces the need to do something about it. With the heli count the density is 13, more than the 10/km² that the group seeks to achieve.

Planned numbers for 2021/22 going forwards prompted the following discussion:

DB – JMT are going to shoot whatever deer are on the ground, in order to achieve habitat objectives, one of which would be to achieve a natural treeline. Did not want to give any cull targets for the population model.

AMacM – habitat objectives may require flexibility and by creating a vacuum, there will be an influx of deer into the ground.

EvBB – need to get this discussion going in a positive way, so working together. Potentially could have target culls but also interim discussions. Comparison of habitat results would also be helpful. Could indicate how all might need to be flexible; the important thing is to work together and be open-minded.

RS – it is difficult to make the population model work and how the rest of the WKDMG can plan their culls is we don't know what JMT plan to do, particularly when we are trying to reduce the population, others cannot plan if we are not being kept informed. Neighbours would surely help if asked, but would need to know what JMT were aiming to achieve by way of culls.

DB – transparency is crucial. Assistance from neighbours will be welcome, so that JMT can achieve habitat objectives.

EvBB – HIA transparency is crucial for all, but numbers that are indicative are also essential.

DB – culling programme in Glenfeshie shows it is impossible to predict cull figures. Numbers will be shared through the year, but there is no logic or basis for numbers to be given at this stage.

EvBB – less about philosophy, more about working together and reaching consensus.

AMacM – other groups have set up smaller sub-groups that meet regularly to discuss cull progress, weather etc. For issues like breakdowns, landslips etc, it would help deliver what you are wanting.

DB – welcome that suggestion and it is the future of deer management. Habitat objectives between different members is different, however. How we deal with those differences is critical.

RS – if JMT's objectives are the same as eg Corrou or Glen Feshie, then that is not shared by anyone else in the group.

GH – a technical problem for modelling if there is no number provided by JMT.

RS – the important issue is to share information through the cull process. RS and JB will discuss how to set up some kind of platform where people can share information as the cull goes forward. Meanwhile we will have to guess a number for the JMT to try and make the model work. To reiterate that WKDMG is not looking to maintain the higher population it currently has over a period. Reaching a density of 10 should show habitat improvements. It was also difficult for the WKDMG to understand changes in habitat when JMT used a very different approach to monitoring and transect selection; most of the WKDMG used a large number of plots well-distributed. JMT used a much smaller number of concentrated plots. Adopting the same HIA monitoring as the rest of the group would help considerably in understanding habitat condition.

DB – happy to go back and discuss with colleagues. Keen to make the change from a number basis to a HIA basis for deer management. Happy to support the on-going cull platform discussion forum.

IB – would it be accurate as a starting point for an estimate of the JMT cull to be the number of deer within the fenceline? DB – no, JMT's concern was more concerned about numbers on the open hill.

HIA – KF and Kilchoan done by JB – graphs shared with the group. Higher impacts than previously but still basically low on KF. Camusrory – impacts have gone up with the winter incursion.

Action – JB to look at setting up some kind of group whereby stalkers can maintain contact throughout the culling period to keep each other abreast of numbers etc.

Action – Camusrory will share HIA stats with Group.

5. Deer welfare

Any deer welfare issues to be reported.

KF – there was some calf mortality.

IB – some stags and some calves.

DF – predominantly calves (17) and 3-4 stags 12+ yrs old and a couple of old hinds. Calves looked to be in good condition size-wise but appear to have died after long cold snap followed by heavy rain for about a week.

FR – similar observations. 4 calves, 1 knobber, 1 stag. Same for Kingie and other neighbours.

AMacM – Achnacarry reported 38% recruitment and stags have done really well, good woodland cover and sheep off the ground 10-15 years ago. Shows a positive response by the deer to improved cover and habitat.

6. Woodlands and forestry

Updates on woodland, forestry and future proposals to be discussed.

GH – about to fence the area around the shelterbelt and hydro (70ha) and have done the Kilchoan park area. Then 60-70ha to be fenced a Croulin. Then 60-70ha planned for KF the following year, then 2 new proposals for Kilchoan (200ha altogether) and Barisadale (80-90ha). As a group, on average, we have perhaps done 60-70ha/ year, so good progress. Woodland outside fencing – small but significant pieces on Sgamadail and KF that are regenerating without fences, on a localised area. Kilchoan also has significant regen in spurts outside fencing. Therefore, the idea that it is impossible to have regen outside fences with deer present is not holding, ie not a binary discussion about whether we can have deer or regen, not both. More complex than numbers, or habitat. One of the things to consider is disturbance to achieve regen while deer are present in the wider landscape.

RS – what about incursion? GH – occasional incursion and mob grazing not necessarily a problem. AMacM – in his experience damage done by incursions is dependent on palatability of the trees; native species esp pine were palatable and if subject to even occasional incursions could suffer severe damage.

7. Habitat impact assessment

Work to date in 2021 includes woodland monitoring at Barisdale and open ground monitoring on KF and Kilchoan. Paper attached.

Action – CM to collate data as it is provided to present in a more complete format at the November meeting.

8. Invasive non-native species

Any sightings to be reported.

GH – rhoddies presumably coming from Tarbet invading Bhromisaig. KF has got some rhoddies, now 98% of the way through an eradication programme. Next is Barisdale, KLH and Tarbert.

No new pig signs.

9. Training and competence

10. Communications and Data Protection

Website update requested Feb 2021 with maps etc; follow up email sent 23 June 2021. Incorrectly portrayed maps should now be visible in landscape.

11. AOB

None offered.

12. Review of action points and Action Plan 2021 going forwards

Updated Action Plan 2021 attached.

Barisdale SSSI – HIA for the woodland done in 2021. No issues with the SSSI. Objectives for woodland in general and for the SSSI are somewhat different. EvBB – hope that a visit for AMacM to Barisdale can be set up soon.

Venison – KF hoping to be able to process whole cull in due course. ML – catastrophic collapse in venison market didn't materialise and Simpson Game maintained promise to keep taking carcasses.

1 case of Lyme in 2020.

13. DONM

Monday 15 November 2021