

EAST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

May 2016 DRAFT

DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN

2016 – 2025

Background Information

PREFACE

This Deer Management Plan has been developed for the East Sutherland Deer Management Group (ESDMG). The Plan is funded both by the deer group and by Scottish Natural Heritage. It runs from 2016 until 2025 and has been formally endorsed by all the Members of the Group. It has been designed to be readily updated as needs arise and will be reviewed on a six-monthly basis or as required, with a systematic review taking place at the end of the first five year period in 2020.

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Also included are recommended larder sheets for males and females.

Part One - INTRODUCTION

1. PURPOSE OF PLAN

The purpose of this Plan is to provide:-

- (a) an agreed statement of the shared views of the Members of the Group about the management of wild deer in the area covered by the Group;
- (b) an agreed set of the actions to try and ensure that deer management in the area is in line with those shared views;
- (c) an agreed set of actions that will identify and deliver relevant public interest and benefits throughout the area;
- (d) an agreed pattern of arrangements to try and ensure that the actions are implemented and their effectiveness monitored;
- (e) a document that acts as a ready source of information for both members and the general public alike, clarifying points of contact, and setting out how communications can best be received and addressed.

2. GROUP AREA

The East Sutherland Deer Management Group (ESDMG) lies in the north of the main red deer range in Scotland, from the Flow Country of the North Highlands to the east coast. The broad boundaries of the area are:

- in the west: the A836 running from Lairg to Altnaharra
- in the north: Loch Naver, along the Rosal Forest boundary, around Loch Rimsdale and along the north sides of, Loch Nan Clar, Loch Badanloch and Loch Achnamoine to the Helmsdale River
- in the north-east: the A897 down Strath Kildonan to Helmsdale
- in the east: the A9 / coast between Helmsdale and Loch Fleet, just south of Golspie
- in the south: the A839 along Strath Fleet from the coast to Lairg

Other than the villages around the periphery of the area and crofting communities around Rogart and along the coast, there are few settlements or public roads within the DMG.

For a map of the ESDMG area, see [1. ES DMG Location Map](#).

ESDMG shares its boundary to the north with the Northern DMG and its western boundary with North West Sutherland DMG. There is currently no formal deer management group to the south.

Scale and ownership

The entire area extends to around 123,000 ha, which is primarily open hill but includes a considerable area of farmland and nearly 18,000 ha of woodland and forestry, much of which is enclosed. East Sutherland is one of the larger DMG areas in Scotland. There are 20 main members of the Group, split previously into 2 sub-groups, North-west and South-east. We propose that an additional East sub-group is created, recognising that the eastern tip is essentially cut-off from the rest of the south-east sub-group by fencing. In addition, there are a number of smaller properties around the periphery of the Group, particularly to the south and east. While not members, these properties are influenced by deer management activities and may correspond with the Group. Broadly speaking, the interior of the Group is dominated by hill and upland terrain with large expanses of blanket bog and deep peat,

grazed by both red deer and sheep, with red grouse also being locally important in some areas. The balance of objectives varies between owners, but red deer are important throughout. Around the periphery of the Group there is a significant area of both coniferous forestry and native woodland, particularly to the west and north, while fertile farmland lies to the south and east. A considerable part of the forest area is managed by Forest Enterprise, although there are also significant private woodland plantations as well. There are a number of both tenanted and owner occupied farms within the area and in the wider vicinity, as well as areas of crofting tenure, with grazing committees being an important community interest. Fishing is important on the Helmsdale, Brora and Naver rivers, and there are a large number of lochs within the area.

3. GROUP MEMBERSHIP

There are a range of main management objectives within the group area, summarized on [5. ESDMG Management Objectives Map](#) and in Table 1. In many cases there are mixed objectives with deer management occurring alongside other sporting interests and / or livestock farming or overall range management.

Of those estates providing information on their objectives, there are: **(Need to update this section)**

- 3 properties, covering 25,000 ha or 24% of the area, managed primarily for deer. This is the most significant land use objective within the DMG area
- 3 properties, covering 21,150 ha or 20% of the area, managed for both deer and livestock farming
- 2 properties, covering 17,200 ha or 16% of the area, managed primarily for deer but with renewable energy interests and no agriculture
- 2 properties, covering 13,100 ha or 12% of the area, managed for deer and fishing, with no agricultural interest
- 1 property, covering 10,400 ha or 10% of the area, managed primarily for forestry
- 1 property, covering 7,900 ha or 8% of the area, with mixed sporting interests and no agriculture
- 1 property, covering 4,800 ha or 5% of the area, with mixed sporting and livestock farming interests
- 1 property, covering 2,300 ha or 2% of the area, managed primarily for livestock farming but with some deer and other sporting interests
- 2 properties partly within the DMG area, covering 2,260 ha or 2% of the area, with deer stalking, fishing and livestock interests
- 1 property covering 1,400 ha or representing 1% of the area, with crofting as its major land use activity but some small-scale deer stalking as an additional interest.

The following table gives a summary of the management objectives of the properties within the deer group. All are either fully subscribing or reporting members of the group. Reporting members report deer culls to ESDMG once a year and receive all Group communications. The properties can be located at [2. ESDMG Members Map](#).

Table 1. East Sutherland DMG Members & their Management Objectives

<i>Property</i>	<i>Main Objectives</i>	<i>Size (ha)[†]</i>
<i>Altnaharra</i>	<i>Sporting / fishing / livestock</i>	<i>1,200</i>
<i>Badanloch</i>	<i>Deer / fishing</i>	<i>5,100</i>
<i>Balnacoil</i>	<i>Deer / livestock</i>	<i>7,400</i>
<i>Ben Armine</i>	<i>Deer</i>	<i>8,000</i>
<i>Borrobol</i>	<i>Deer / livestock</i>	<i>8,750</i>
<i>Clebrig</i>	<i>Sporting / livestock</i>	<i>4,800</i>
<i>*Craggie / Doulay</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>700</i>
<i>Crakaig</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>1,500</i>
<i>FE Dalchork</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>10,400</i>
<i>Dalnessie</i>	<i>Deer / livestock</i>	<i>5,000</i>
<i>Dalreavoch</i>	<i>Deer (crofting)</i>	<i>5,000</i>
<i>Dunrobin</i>	<i>Deer / wind farm</i>	<i>11,800</i>
<i>*Gartymore</i>	<i>Crofting</i>	<i>1,400</i>
<i>Gordonbush</i>	<i>Deer / wind farm</i>	<i>5,400</i>
<i>Kildonan</i>	<i>Deer / fishing</i>	<i>8,000</i>
<i>Kintradwell</i>	<i>Livestock farming</i>	<i>2,300</i>
<i>*Lairg Estate</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>1,200</i>
<i>Loch Choire</i>	<i>Deer</i>	<i>12,000</i>
<i>Morvich</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>1,970</i>
<i>*Rosal Forest</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>2,600</i>
<i>*Sciberscross</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>1,000</i>
<i>Torrish</i>	<i>Sporting / fishing / livestock</i>	<i>1,060</i>
<i>*Torrish Woods</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>500</i>
<i>Tressady</i>	<i>Sporting (crofting)</i>	<i>7,900</i>
<i>West Garty / Culgower</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>1,200</i>
<i>Total area covered:</i>		<i>116,180 ha</i>

[†] *Approximate area, excluding significant lochs and deer-fenced ground*

** These properties are not yet official members of ES DMG. It is proposed that they become reporting members in the first instance, i.e. report deer culls and receive Group communications, but do not pay a subscription to become a full member of the Group*

n/a - no information available

3a. MEMBER DESCRIPTIONS

The following section gives a brief overview of the essential management information relating to each of the Group Members that has provided information.

Contact details for the Group are given later in the document (see 14.) Contact details for individual members are given in [Appendix 2. ES DMG Contact List](#), which is confidential to Group members only.

Altnaharra

A small part of Altnaharra Estate, the Vagastie beat, lies within ESDMG while the bulk of their ground lies in the neighbouring North West Sutherland DMG area.

Altnaharra aim to run a sustainable rural estate with sporting opportunities, farming, fishing, accommodation and renewable energy as part of an overall mix. The vast majority of the hill ground is used to provide sporting stag and hind shooting, with associated lettings for accommodation. This is a major part of the overall business and the backbone of the community around Altnaharra. In addition, the estate runs a deer farm. There are no longer any sheep kept on the property, although a small number of cattle have been recently re-introduced to help deal with possible undergrazed lower lying areas and overall sustainability. Fishing on Loch Naver and the River Naver are central to estate income as well, often interconnected with stalking and letting accommodation. A considerable amount of woodland felling/ restocking and woodland creation has taken place in recent years. There are no plans for any further significant plantings, felling or fence removal at present.

Three full-time staff are employed on the property, all with some input to deer management.

Badanloch

Badanloch Estate lies to the north of management group area at the source of the River Helmsdale. It falls within both ESDMG and Northern DMG. All ground to the north of Loch Nan Clar, Loch Badanloch, Loch Achnamoine and the Helmsdale River lies outwith ESDMG.

The estate is run as a traditional sporting estate with deer stalking, fishing and some walked up grouse shooting being the main sporting activities. Wider estate objectives include wildlife and habitat conservation, as well as keeping the estate well maintained. In addition, there are sheep farming interests, primarily to the north of the estate.

Although fishing is important to the estate economy, stalking is the primary activity on the estate and therefore deer management is a priority. Consequently, the conservation and maintenance of the deer population and their habitats are of high importance. A native woodland scheme was planted around Gearnsary in 2010. Much of the blanket bog habitat is designated within Badanloch Bogs SSSI and a small area of each of Skinsdale Peatlands and Truderscaig SSSIs.

The estate employs 2 full-time staff responsible for deer management. Additional information about the estate can be found at: www.badanlochstates.co.uk.

Balnacoil

Balnacoil Estate lies in the centre of the deer management group. It is a typical Highland estate, mixing deer stalking and livestock farming interests. While deer are of paramount

importance, there are extensively-grazed native Angus and Shorthorn cattle herds. In addition, there is a small pheasant shoot for family members only.

A significant part of the estate lies within the Skinsdale Peatlands and Coir'an Eoin SSSIs, both of which are designated for their blanket bog vegetation. In addition, there are established areas of coniferous plantation and native woodland plantings which are open to deer.

Balnacoil has 2 full-time staff responsible for deer management and farming duties as the season requires.

Ben Armine

Ben Armine is owned by Sutherland Estates and is run as a traditional deer stalking estate. As such, sporting deer management is the primary objective of the property and is based on numbers which are sustainable in terms of the habitat. Ben Armine is largely open hill and has a significant area of blanket bog which is designated within Skinsdale Peatlands SSSI. One full-time resident stalker is currently employed on Ben Armine but on his retirement after the 2016 stag season, all sport stalking and deer management will be taken over by Dunrobin Sporting.

The letting of Ben Armine lodge is an important part of the overall business and the aim is to make this more available for general holiday lets in the future. For further information, see www.sutherlandestates.com/index.htm.

The estate currently has a relatively small area of woodland, including 2 recent small-scale plantings and a mature lodgepole pine plantation which is accessible to deer. Further woodland expansion may be considered if an economic and management case can be made.

Borrobol

Borrobol is one of the largest estates in the group. It has a diverse economy with a mix of deer stalking, sheep and cattle farming, forestry and holiday letting interests. Of these, stalking and sheep farming are central. The owners' objectives are to maintain the deer forest in a good state and sustain sporting income to pay for estate management, while exercising a duty of care over the deer stock.

A significant part of the west of the estate lies within the Skinsdale Peatlands SSSI. This area is important to the main Borrobol hind herd. Elsewhere, the ground is relatively productive with abundant alluvial greens. There are a few natural woodlands, such as those along the River Helmsdale, as well as extensive conifer plantations, planted shelter belts and a large area planted for Christmas tree production. These are generally fenced and inaccessible to deer.

Borrobol employs one full-time stalker and a seasonal assistant.

Clebrig

Clebrig Estate is on the north-west edge of the group, lying along Loch Naver and dominated by Ben Klibreck, a Munro popular with hill walkers. It is a family run, mixed-use farming and sporting estate. The owners' aim to be recognised for the quality of their sheep, deer, ptarmigan and grouse, as well as for their exceptional landscape and fauna.

Sheep and deer are the main priorities of the estate, although maintaining the ecological environment is also considered important. A significant part of the estate falls within Ben Klibreck SSSI which is designated for its nationally important geology, alpine heath,

blanket bog, lochs and woodland.

Clebrig has 1 full-time employee who is responsible for managing both the sheep flock and the deer herd. He has seasonal assistance for both stalking and shepherding duties as required.

Dalchork

Dalchork is owned and managed by Forest Enterprise (FE) and lies along the western edge of East Sutherland DMG, north of Lairg. The bulk of the property is a large commercial conifer plantation which was established during the 1950s. This is fenced from the rest of the group and contains very significant numbers of sika deer. Healthy sustainable deer populations are an integral part of FE's wider Land Management Plan. A contract stalker is responsible for all deer management.

In addition, FE own an area of open hill land to the north of the plantation. Deer on this ground are stalked under a tenancy agreement. Much of the lower ground to the north-west is under grazing tenancy to the owner of the Crask Inn, who runs sheep and a few hill cattle. Part of Dalchork's open ground falls within Ben Klibreck SSSI, including a high proportion of the SSSI's best quality blanket bog.

Dalnessie

Dalnessie Estate has a mix of deer stalking and sheep farming interests. Traditionally, the estate was a stag forest and sport stalking, with associated letting of the lodge, is an important part of the estate economy. The owners therefore wish to keep deer numbers steady in order to be able to maintain the same number of weeks letting from year to year. Some hind stalking is also let commercially.

The River Brora and its headwaters run through the estate. Most of the ground is open rolling hill land to the west of Ben Armine and covered by relatively deep peat. As such it is unsuitable for woodland planting.

Dalnessie employs one full-time estate manager who is responsible for both the deer and sheep.

Dalreavoch / Dunrobin

Dalreavoch and Dunrobin both belong to Sutherland Estates and in recent years have largely been managed together. A significant part of Dalreavoch is under crofting tenure, while Dunrobin is largely uncrofted. The crofting land on Dalreavoch includes considerable areas of forestry and native woodland plantings, many of which are fenced.

Both properties are managed by Dunrobin Sporting (dunrobinsporting.co.uk) with deer stalking as the primary objective. Their aim is to produce a sustainable crop of red deer in balance with the environment on the open hill and to protect forestry. Roe deer are also stalked commercially, primarily in Dunrobin Glen. Dunrobin Sporting employs one full-time and two seasonal stalkers.

Wider estate interests include holiday lettings (www.sutherlandestates.com/index.htm) and renewable energy production (Kilbraur Windfarm). The windfarm is subject to a Habitat Management Plan. Part of Dunrobin Estate lies within Loch Fleet SSSI and NNR. The SSSI is designated for multiple features but of particular relevance to deer management are the pinewoods. These are characterised by areas of original native pinewood ground flora and impressive lichen-rich lawns.

Gartymore (*proposed reporting member*)

Gartymore, West Helmsdale, is owned by Sutherland Estates and the entire property is under crofting tenure. A community buy-out is under consideration. There has been little formal deer management on this small estate in the past but in 2015 a stalking tenant took on a 10 year lease.

Gordonbush

Gordonbush Estate is leased from its owners by Scottish & Southern Energy for wind-generated electricity production. The estate is largely managed for deer stalking while simultaneously being subject to a Habitat Management Plan (HMP), as a condition of the planning permission. Practical Land Management Ltd. is responsible for the delivery of this plan, and in particular the deer management elements of it.

The HMP's primary objective is to mitigate against potential adverse effects of the windfarm on Golden eagle, Merlin and Golden plover. There are secondary conservation objectives to enhance peatland and native woodland habitats and species, and to promote black grouse habitat. The plan encompasses the management of deer, heather, bracken, native and commercial woodland and the restoration of peatland and acid grasslands. Deer are seen as an important component of the plan and, in the absence of any domestic livestock, apply grazing pressure as required to maintain sward heterogeneity. Plenty of natural shelter is available to the deer.

Part of the estate is under crofting tenure. The south-eastern boundary is fenced around neighbouring townships.

Kildonan

Kildonan Estate is run as a traditional sporting estate. Deer stalking and fishing on the River Helmsdale are the primary economic activities. The owners' objectives are for a balanced, sustainable sporting estate with stalking as an integral component. To achieve this, the need for a well-structured deer herd and sustainable deer management is recognised.

The ground is largely open hill dominated by wet heath vegetation. There are a few small areas of native woodland, including regeneration blocks along Glen Loth and at Craggie. In addition, there are some larger coniferous plantations which have experienced serious wind-throw. All these woodlands are now accessible to deer.

The estate's eastern march along Glen Loth is fully fenced which largely prevents any movement of deer across the glen onto Torrish or Crakaig ground. Kildonan Estate employs one full-time and one seasonal stalker.

Kintradwell

Kintradwell Estate is run primarily as a livestock farm but with sporting interests which include deer and grouse (see www.georgegoldsmith.com/properties/kintradwell-estate). Their objective is to maintain and improve the hill to the benefit of sheep, grouse and deer. The ability to let both stag and hind stalking is of high importance as income derived from stalking is vital to the economic viability of the estate. Consequently, deer welfare and the sustainable management of the herd are important. However, when considering changes to management practices or use of the hill, sheep and cattle are prioritized over deer. The estate

employs one full-time stalker.

There is a fence line running along Kintradwell land that prevents deer accessing the A9 or ground below it. This has significantly reduced the number of deer-vehicle collisions on the road. The birch woodlands of Loth Gorge SSSI are inaccessible to deer, having been fenced in 2015. Additional fencing now runs up Glen Loth to a lodgepole pine plantation which is open to deer from Kintradwell but is fenced on the Crakaig side.

Loch Choire

Loch Choire Estate is the largest property in the group, occupying a remote tract of land around Loch Choire, the southern face of Ben Klibreck and the hill ground towards Ben Armine. It is an upland sporting estate with deer stalking as its primary land use. Salmon and trout fishing are secondary interests. The property is let weekly from July to December to tenants who generally take either stag or hind stalking. The estate employs one full-time and one seasonal stalker.

A significant area of the estate is covered by conservation designations with 4 X SSSIs being wholly or partly on Loch Choire ground. These are Ben Klibreck, Mallart, Truderscaig and Skinsdale Peatlands SSSIs, designated for multiple features which include woodland and blanket bog vegetation. Selected areas of the loch-side woodland were fenced in 2011-12 to promote woodland expansion and regeneration and bring these woodlands back into favourable condition. However, this has resulted in the loss of important deer wintering ground. In the longer-term, woodland blocks fenced earlier will be opened up.

Torrish

Torrish Estate is run as a mixed farming and sporting estate, with sheep, deer, grouse and fishing interests (www.sportinglets.co.uk/torrish/). It lies on the eastern periphery of the DMG area. A larger part of the estate is on the north side of the River Helmsdale, falling into Northern DMG area. Deer management on the south of the Helmsdale (i.e. within ESDMG) is constrained by access as there is no bridge and the river can only be forded when not in spate.

The estate aims to maintain healthy populations of sheep, grouse and deer which are equally important objectives. This is achieved by careful moorland management and a sustainable culling policy. Most of the land is open hill ground although there is a fenced block of naturally regenerated native woodland. This is due to be opened to deer in the next 5-10 years. The estate employs one full-time stalker and a seasonal ghillie who are responsible for deer management across the whole estate.

Tressady

Tressady Estate is managed as a traditional mixed sporting estate with deer stalking, grouse shooting and fishing being the primary objectives. Most of the estate is under crofting tenure. The crofting tenants have livestock interests and crofter planting schemes which cover a significant area. However, managed removal of sheep is underway by agreement on higher ground to the north of the estate. This area is where deer will become the main focus in an effort to reduce marauding and conflict with crofters to the south and east of the property.

Sporting use is made of both stags and hinds, while roe deer stalking is also available (see www.georgegoldsmith.com/properties/tressady-lodge). The estate employs 2 full-time and 1

seasonal staff members who are responsible for deer management and keeping.

Part of Tressady falls within the Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SSSI and SPA, designated for its internationally important hen harrier population. Deer are not considered an issue in the management of this site. The western boundary of the property is largely fenced to protect forestry interests to the west, although stretches of the fenceline require upgrading.

3b. REPORTING UNITS *(For most properties, these refer to entire estate as before)*

For the purposes of this plan, most properties within the area will be asked to report their counts and culls on the basis of their full property, although there are a few exceptions to this. The most significant change is for Loch Choire which in future should report separately for the north and south beats. In addition, Forest Enterprise should continue to report separately for Dalchork plantation and open hill; Sutherland Estates / Dunrobin Sporting should report separately for Ben Armine, Dalreavoch and Dunrobin; Altnaharra, Badanloch and Torrish should report only for the part of their estates that fall within ESDMG.

In this plan, all count and cull information will be reported at the Deer Management Unit level (Table 2). In the past, East Sutherland DMG was split into 2 sub-groups, which can be noted on **3. ES DMG Reporting Units**. However, due to changes in fencing, it is now recommended that the area be split into North-west, South-east and East areas (**4. ES DMG Proposed new Sub-area structure map**). Furthermore, forestry units should become incorporated within the sub-groups as fences are not totally secure, although count data will only be available for open ground properties. The tables below are compiled on this basis. The same Reporting Units are defined on both maps.

Table 2a. ES DMG Deer Management Units: North-west Sub-group

Update with numbers when finalized

<i>Management Unit</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Size (ha)[†]</i>	<i>Deer Manager</i>
<i>Altnaharra (Vagastie)</i>	<i>Sporting / fishing / livestock</i>	<i>1,200</i>	<i>Altnaharra</i>
<i>Badanloch (south)</i>	<i>Deer / fishing</i>	<i>5,100</i>	<i>Badanloch</i>
<i>Ben Armine</i>	<i>Deer</i>	<i>8,000</i>	<i>Dunrobin Sporting</i>
<i>Clebrig</i>	<i>Sporting / livestock</i>	<i>4,800</i>	<i>Clebrig</i>
<i>Dalchork (open hill)</i>	<i>Deer / livestock</i>	<i>2,000</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Dalchork (plantation)</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>8,400</i>	<i>Forest Enterprise</i>
<i>Dalnessie</i>	<i>Deer / livestock</i>	<i>5,000</i>	<i>Dalnessie</i>
<i>Loch Choire (north)</i>	<i>Deer</i>	<i>5,000</i>	<i>Loch Choire</i>
<i>Loch Choire (south)</i>	<i>Deer</i>	<i>7,000</i>	<i>Loch Choire</i>
<i>*Rosal Forest</i>	<i>Forestry</i>	<i>2,600</i>	<i>n/a</i>
Total area covered:		49,100	

[†]Approximate area, excluding significant lochs and deer-fenced ground

*Reporting Units are yet to officially join ESDMG

n/a – information currently not available

Table 2b. ES DMG Deer Management Units: South-east Sub-group

Update with numbers when finalized

Management Unit	Objectives	Size (ha)[†]	Deer Manager
Balnacoil	Deer / livestock	7,400	Balnacoil
Borrobol	Deer / livestock	8,750	Borrobol
*Craggie / Doulay	Forestry	700	n/a
Dalreavoch	Deer (crofting)	5,000	Dunrobin Sporting
Dunrobin	Deer	11,800	Dunrobin Sporting
Gordonbush	Deer / wind farm	5,400	Practical Land Management Ltd.
Kildonan	Deer / fishing	8,000	Kildonan
Kintradwell	Livestock	2,300	Kintradwell
*Lairg Estate	Forestry	1,200	Lairg Estate
Morvich	n/a	1,970	Morvich
*Sciberscross	Forestry	1,000	n/a
Total area covered:		61,420	

[†]Approximate area, excluding significant lochs and deer-fenced ground

*Reporting Units are yet to officially join ESDMG

n/a – information currently not available

Table 2c. ES DMG Deer Management Units: East Sub-group

Update with numbers when finalized

Management Unit	Objectives	Size (ha)[†]	Deer Manager
Crakaig	n/a	1,500	Crakaig
*Gartymore	Crofting	1,400	Gartymore
Torrish (south)	Sporting / fishing / livestock	1,060	Torrish
*Torrish Woods	Forestry	500	n/a
West Garty /Culgower	n/a	1,200	West Garty /Culgower
Total area covered:		5,660	

[†]Approximate area, excluding significant lochs and deer-fenced ground

*Reporting Units are yet to officially join ESDMG

n/a – information currently not available

4. DEER INFORMATION REQUIRED & CULLING OPERATIONS

The data on deer counts and culls supplied by Members to ESDMG have always been based on their overall land holdings. Members agree, however, that for the purposes of implementing this plan they will report counts and culls and set cull targets at the Management Unit scale (see above). This will allow a better analysis of the information provided in and around those areas of differing management objectives.

Members will agree on the deer management records that will be kept by all Members for sharing with the Group, including count and cull data, and the format in which these sets of data will be presented. The agreed formats are included in [Appendix 4. ESDMG Deer Cull Information](#).

Recommended cull record sheets are appended to this document.

All ESDMG members agree to make sufficient resources available to carry out the culling programme outlined in this plan.

All culling operations will be conducted in a low-key manner, and priority always given to spreading activity throughout the normal seasons using existing resources.

5. DESIGNATED SITES IN THE EAST SUTHERLAND DMG AREA

Within the DMG area there are five different types of designation:

National Nature Reserve (NNR)

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Special Protection Area (SPA)

Ramsar Site

Together these Protected Areas cover about 20% of the DMG area. Overlapping much of this is an area of newly classified 'Wild land' which covers 43% of the DMG. In addition, the Flow Country is on the UK's 'Tentative List' of sites for consideration by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

National Nature Reserves (NNR)

The first National Nature Reserves were designated 50 years ago, and at that time they were the cornerstone of nature conservation policy, safeguarding sites of national conservation importance as well as providing interpretative material and allowing the public to enjoy these sites. All NNRs are now designated as SSSIs to strengthen their protection. There are currently 65 National Nature Reserves in Scotland.

Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) represent the best of Scotland's natural heritage. They are 'special' for their plants, animals or habitats, their rocks or landforms, or a combination of such natural features. Together, they form a network of the best examples of natural features throughout Scotland, and support a wider network across Great Britain and the European Union.

Scottish Natural Heritage chooses sites after detailed survey and evaluation against published scientific criteria. SSSIs can include freshwater, and sea water down to the mean low water mark of spring tides, as well as land. At 1st January 2011, there were 1,437 SSSIs, covering over 1,020,000 hectares or 12.7% of Scotland.

SNH designates SSSIs to protect the best of our natural heritage by making sure that decision-makers, managers of land and their advisors, as well as the planning authorities and other public bodies, are aware of them when considering changes in land-use or other activities which might affect them. It is the obligation of landowner /occupiers to maintain, enhance or, where necessary, restore SSSIs on their property. The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 provides the legislative framework around which all SSSI sites are administered. <http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/designatedareas/ssi.pdf>.

Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are areas designated under the European Directive commonly known as the 'Habitats' Directive. Together with Special Protection Areas, which are designated under the Wild Birds Directive for wild birds and their habitats, SACs form the Natura 2000 network of sites. Most SACs on land or freshwater in Scotland are also underpinned by notification as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The additional SAC designation is recognition that some or all of the wildlife and habitats are particularly valued in a European context.

Special Protection Area (SPA)

A Special Protection Area (SPA) is an area of land, water or sea which has been identified as being of international importance for the breeding, feeding, wintering or the migration of rare and vulnerable species of birds found within the European Union. Special Protection Areas are designated under the European Wild Birds Directive and, together with SACs, form the Natura 2000 network of sites. A number of SPAs include areas notified as SSSIs and the additional SPA designation affords these areas enhanced protection.

Ramsar Site

Ramsar is the name of a town in Iran where the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance was adopted in 1971. The UK Government signed up to the Convention in 1976. Currently 164 countries are Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 2083 wetland sites designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

In Scotland, 51 Ramsar sites have been designated as internationally important wetlands, covering a total area of about 313,000 hectares. All Ramsar sites in Scotland are also either SPAs or SACs, and many are also SSSIs. Unsurprisingly, internationally important wetlands are also of European interest for a wide variety of waterbirds, bogs, lochs, coastal wetlands and other water-dependent habitats and species. Legally, Scottish Ramsar sites are safeguarded by the measures to protect and enhance the Natura sites and SSSIs which overlap them. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) also includes Ramsar sites in its site condition monitoring programme.

All the conservation designations within the DMG area can be located on [8. ES DMG Designated sites](#) and [9. ESDMG SPA & Ramsar sites map](#). The wild land area can be seen at [10. ESDMG Landscape map](#).

Within the East Sutherland Deer Management Group area there are 18 X SSSIs, designated for a total of 48 X features. Of these, 35 are biological as opposed to geological features and of the biological features, 16 are relevant to deer management. Of these 16 features, 6 are considered to be in favourable condition, 7 in recovering condition and 3 in unfavourable condition. Those in unfavourable condition are the blanket bog features at Ben Klibreck and Skinsdale Peatland SSSIs, as well as the plant assemblage (including scarce plant species) at Skinsdale Peatland SSSIs.

There are also 2 X SAC sites and 4 X SPAs, covering 10 and 23 designated biological features, respectively. This includes the Caithness & Sutherland Peatlands SAC which covers 9% of the DMG area. It is designated for 8 biological features, of which 3 are relevant to deer management. All 3 X of these features (blanket bog; wet heathland with cross-leaved heath; depressions on peat substrates) are unconsidered to be in unfavourable condition. The Ramsar designated Caithness & Sutherland Peatlands site overlaps the Caithness & Sutherland Peatlands SAC and is designated for 4 features, including blanket bog. Again, this feature is considered to be in unfavourable condition. None of the features for which the SPAs are designated are relevant to deer management.

A full account of all protected areas, their current status and what properties are involved is given in [Appendix 3. ES DMG Designated Sites](#). In addition, [Appendix 6. Monitoring of Designated Features](#) summarizes the likely contribution of deer to these sites, and details when they were last monitored.

Part Two - OVERALL AIMS & OBJECTIVES

6. LONG TERM VISION

Members support the long term vision for deer populations and their management as laid out in *Scotland's Wild Deer – A National Approach*. Members also fully support the *Code of Practice on Deer Management*, and all work is carried out in accordance with the *Best Practice Guides*, which continue to evolve.

- Deer populations will be managed sustainably so that their management is fully integrated with all local land uses and land use objectives.
- Such management will ensure high standards of deer welfare and public safety, and play a constructive role in the long term stewardship of local habitats.
- Local deer management will continue to deliver and further develop its positive contributions to the rural economy. Deer management and wildlife management more generally within the Group will be seen as an attractive and worthwhile occupation associated with high standards of skills and employment practice.

7. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The main objectives for the Group's deer management during the period of this Plan, are as follows, in all cases adhering to Best Practice Guidelines:-

- (i) To safeguard and promote deer welfare within the East Sutherland DMG area
- (ii) To achieve an appropriate balance between deer and their habitat, and between deer and other land uses, to minimize unacceptable damage to agricultural, forestry or sporting interests, and to maintain and improve the condition of the natural heritage.
- (iii) Within the constraints of (ii) and the necessary management culls associated with this, to fulfil the annual sporting and venison production objectives of individual Members. During this plan this will amount to some **XXX stags** and approximately **XXX animals** overall annually.
- (iv) To market such activity and produce to best advantage.
- (v) Without prejudice to (ii), to bring local numbers in to line with actual sporting requirements and other aspirations in that area, and to facilitate an overall grazing regime that will gradually improve the overall condition of the wider habitats within the DMG area. It is anticipated that the target summer population will then be some **xxxx stags, xxxx hinds and xxxx calves**, by **2020**, and **xxxx stags, xxxx hinds and xxxx calves** by **2025**, and numbers will be maintained at this level, subject to ongoing reviews of group objectives and regular habitat condition monitoring. The difference in the two population totals is to try and achieve a 1:1 ratio of stags: hinds by the end of the ten year period, allowing numbers to gradually converge over the ten years.
- (vi) To ensure that such resources, training and monitoring capacity as are required to achieve the above objectives are made available.
- (vii) Where appropriate, to provide site specific management advice or information.
- (viii) To ensure full participation from throughout the area in the deer management group.

- (ix) To maintain and improve local employment, be that specifically in deer management, or wildlife management and agricultural activity more generally within the area.
- (x) To sure that an effective system of communication is in place for the internal purpose of members, for the wider community of the area and for external agencies and other interested parties. The Group will be pro-active in all their communications.

Part Three - MANAGEMENT POLICIES & INFORMATION

8. RED DEER

8a. POPULATION SIZE

Counting effort in large parts of the Group has been good, with most estates in the existing North-west and South-east sub-groups counting regularly each spring. However, there has been consistently poor co-ordination between estates, particularly regarding the date of counting. Consequently, counting rarely occurs simultaneously across the group and the degree of double- or under-counting is unknown. Participation in counting by some of the smaller, more peripheral estates has been patchy, particularly within the proposed new East sub-group. There has been no systematic counting during summer.

Deer Commission for Scotland (DCS) conducted a helicopter count of the whole Group area in December 2008, and this probably provides the best baseline we have regarding deer numbers in the Group. Fig. 1 shows the total number of deer counted in subsequent years across the Group. Complete data are not available for the East Sub-group in many years and Morvich Estate has been excluded from SE Sub-group in all years. Otherwise, missing data for Altnharra (Vagastie) in 2009-11, Balnacoil in 2013, Kildonan in 2014 were assumed to be intermediate between the previous and subsequent counts, while Clebrig was assumed to have the same count in 2016 as 2015.

Fig. 1. Total number of red deer counted by sub-group. The 2009 count represents the most recent helicopter count. (Morvich Estate is excluded from SE sub-group, missing data for many years from E sub-group - see text)

The South-east Sub-group has the largest deer population and therefore has a greater influence on overall numbers within the Group. It is unclear whether the marked drop in numbers in the SE Sub-group in the year following the helicopter count is real or whether it simply reflects the difference in count accuracy between a helicopter and ground count. Population modelling suggests that considerable under-counting may be a problem within this Sub-group. In the NW Sub-group, with rather different topography, this seems to be less

of an issue, but there is a clear drop in numbers after the harsh winter of 2010/11. Counts suggest that numbers across the NW and SE Sub-groups have increased steadily between 2011 and 2014, reflecting lower culls (see 8b. below), and since then appear to have stabilised at around 11,000 deer, equivalent to a density of 11.5 deer / km². However, this may be an under-estimate if the South-east Sub-group has been under-counting. Although the much smaller East sub-group has the lowest number of deer, the average deer density in the most recent complete count (2014) was 25.9 deer / km². Consequently, if the East sub-group and Morvich are included, the most recent total count for the whole Group is 12,410 deer, equivalent to a density of 12.2 deer / km². This compares with a density of 13.3 deer / km² at the time of the 2008 DCS count, but it is suspected that overall densities may be considerably higher than recent counts suggest.

Count data from 2015 are presented in Table 3 and summarized on [16. ES DMG 2015 Deer Density](#), and can be compared with the helicopter count data [15. ESDMG 2008 deer count density map](#).

Table 3. Count data from 2015 grouped by Sub-group & excluding forestry properties

<i>Sub-group</i>	<i>Management Unit</i>	<i>Size (ha)[†]</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Density (deer / km²)</i>
<i>NW</i>	<i>Altnaharra (Vagastie)</i>	<i>1,200</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>2.3</i>
	<i>Badanloch (south)</i>	<i>5,100</i>	<i>724</i>	<i>14.2</i>
	<i>Ben Armine</i>	<i>8,000</i>	<i>435</i>	<i>5.4</i>
	<i>Clebrig</i>	<i>4,800</i>	<i>622</i>	<i>13.0</i>
	<i>Dalchork (open hill)</i>	<i>2,000</i>	<i>256</i>	<i>12.8</i>
	<i>Dalnessie</i>	<i>5,000</i>	<i>768</i>	<i>15.4</i>
	<i>Loch Choire</i>	<i>12,000</i>	<i>1,351</i>	<i>11.3</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>38,100</i>	<i>4,184</i>	<i>10.4</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Balnacoil</i>	<i>7,400</i>	<i>1,037</i>	<i>14.0</i>
	<i>Borrobol</i>	<i>8,750</i>	<i>792</i>	<i>9.1</i>
	<i>Dalreavoch</i>	<i>5,000</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>8.2</i>
	<i>Dunrobin</i>	<i>11,800</i>	<i>1,032</i>	<i>8.7</i>
	<i>Gordonbush</i>	<i>5,400</i>	<i>873</i>	<i>16.2</i>
	<i>Kildonan</i>	<i>8,000</i>	<i>1,681</i>	<i>21.0</i>
	<i>Kintradwell</i>	<i>2,300</i>	<i>545</i>	<i>23.7</i>
	<i>Morvich</i>	<i>1,970</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>
	<i>Tressady</i>	<i>7,750</i>	<i>384</i>	<i>8.8</i>
	<i>Total (excl. Morvich)</i>	<i>56,560</i>	<i>6,752</i>	<i>11.6</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Crakaig</i>	<i>1,500</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>
	<i>Gartymore</i>	<i>1,400</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>4.8</i>
	<i>Torrish (south)</i>	<i>1,060</i>	<i>727</i>	<i>68.6</i>
	<i>West Garty / Culgower</i>	<i>1,200</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>5,160</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>

[†]*Approximate area, excluding significant lochs and deer-fenced ground*

Although estates aim to report the deer count broken down into the numbers of stags, hinds and calves, in practice this is rarely achieved. Furthermore, there are inconsistencies between estates and between years in the way counts are broken down, some distinguishing between stags and knobbers and others potentially grouping some knobbers with hinds and calves in ‘unclassified’ deer. Here we follow earlier DCS assumptions that 15% of

unclassified deer are young stags. Some estates routinely report a high proportion of the all annual count as 'unclassified' while others classify a high proportion of hinds and calves separately but group large calves and small hinds as 'unclassified'. Despite these biases, when averaged across estates there appears to be strong consistency in calf: hind ratios between sub-groups but marked differences between years (Fig. 2). These differences reflect annual variation in both calving rates (dependent on hind body condition during the rut, 18 months before the count) and over-winter mortality (dependent on calf body condition and weather during the winter of the count).

Fig. 2. Ratio of calves to hinds among classified deer summarised at the Sub-group level.

Hind numbers can be crudely estimated at the sub-group level using recruitment rates and the sum of hinds, calves and unclassified deer. This allows stag: hind ratios to be calculated (Fig. 3) and we see that the population is a strongly female-biased in all sub-groups. The data suggest that the highest proportion of stags occurs in the SE Sub-group and that relative hind numbers have been increasing in the NW Sub-group since 2011.

Biases in count classification will affect both the calf: hind and stag: hind ratios but are likely to be relatively consistent over time. Modelling the population forward from the DCS helicopter count predicts a very different (male-biased) population structure to that reported in recent counts. A number of invalid assumptions may contribute to this but it also brings into question the reliability of count classification.

Fig. 3. Ratio of stags to hinds at the Sub-group level. Number of stags is the sum of classified stags, knobbers and 15% of unclassified. Number of hinds is calculated using estimated recruitment rates and the sum of hinds, calves and 85% of unclassified deer.

8b. RED DEER CULL DATA

There is good and consistent reporting of cull data across the deer management group going back to 2004/05 although, as with the counts, the data are patchier for the East sub-group. It is unclear whether some estates in the East sub-group have not carried out a cull in some years or whether they have failed to report their culls. It is assumed in all figures below that there was a zero cull. Missing data for Altnharra (Vagastie) prior to 2011/12 and for Dalchork (open hill) in 2008/09 were estimated using data from other years.

Fig. 4. Total number of red deer culled across East Sutherland DMG, summarized by sub-group, 2004/05 – 2014/15.

The South-east Sub-group has the highest culls in the Group (48% of 2014/15 cull) and consequently drives the main patterns (Fig. 4). The NW Sub-group accounts for nearly 1/3 of the overall cull and the East Sub-group around 1/5.

There was a pronounced peak in culling activity in the 2009/10 season, coinciding with the threat of a Section 7 management agreement, but given the following harsh winter, particularly in the NW Sub-group, this activity was not sustained. However, the number of deer culled has had to increase again as deer numbers recovered and large area of ground were fenced off from deer under woodland planting schemes. The 2014/15 season cull of 2,267 deer representing around 13% of the 2014 population, estimated after calving.

In line with the overall pattern of culling, numbers of stags, hinds and calves shot in the SE-Sub-group were higher than in the NW Sub-group in all years, while numbers shot in the East Sub-group were considerably lower than in both other sub-groups (Figs. 5 & 6). This is as would be expected from the relative areas of the sub-groups.

Breaking down the culls into classes, it can be seen that both NW and SE sub-groups have been culling substantially more hinds than stags throughout the last 10 years (Fig. 6). There has, however, been a slight and gradual decline in the number of hinds shot in both sub-groups over this period. This partly arises from the low hind cull of 2011/12 to allow the population to recover after two winters of high mortality. In both sub-groups hind culls are now increasing again. Trends in numbers of stags shot are less marked, although there has been a slight decline in the NW Sub-group. This is seen more clearly in Fig. 5, which also highlights the peak in stag culls in 2009/10 in the SE sub-group. In the East Sub-group the number of hinds shot has been low throughout the last 10 years until the 2014/15 season when it was almost as high as in the NW Sub-group. Calf culling trends generally follow those of hinds but at a lower level in all sub-groups.

Fig. 5. Comparison of number of stags shot in each sub-group, 2004/05-2014/15.

Fig. 6. Deer cull summaries for each sub-group, 2004/05 – 2014/15.

Red Deer Woodland Culls

The numbers of red deer culled from most forestry properties within ESDMG have not been reported. The exception is Forest Enterprise (FE) cull returns for Dalchork and Naver within the NW Sub-group (Fig. 7). The Naver area includes Rosal forest as well as some small areas outside ESDMG area. The whole of Naver is included in Fig. 7 for illustrative purposes.

Fig. 7. Woodland red deer culls within FE properties, 2005/06 – 2014/15

A larger cull is generally taken from Dalchork than Naver although in 2009/10 there was a break-in of hill deer (primarily from outside ESDMG) into Naver forest. Consequently an unusually large number of hinds and, particularly, stags were shot there that season (Figs. 7 & 8). In most years, the number of stags shot exceeds the number of hinds in both forests (Fig. 8). A relatively low and stable number of calves has been shot over the last 10 years.

Fig. 8. FE woodland red deer cull summary by age / sex class, 2005/06 – 2014/15

The overall number of deer shot in the woodlands generally reflects changes in forestry management rather than changes in the deer population. In addition to red deer, there are significant populations of sika and roe deer, particularly in Dalchork forest (see 9. below).

8c. MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The following factors have been identified as issues relating to red deer management within the Group area:

Condition of designated sites

Around 20% of ESDMG area is covered by conservation designations and, in terms of the public interest, they are a significant consideration. Two of the protected areas within ESDMG, Ben Klibreck and Skinsdale Peatlands SSSIs, are in unfavourable condition due to large herbivore grazing and trampling pressures (see 5. above and [Appendix 3](#)). Although hill sheep and cattle are present in addition to deer on Ben Klibreck, deer are the only large herbivore on Skinsdale Peatlands. Impacts on nationally and internationally important blanket bog, plant assemblages (including scarce plant species), wet heathland with cross-leaved heath and depressions on peat substrate features are currently unacceptably high.

Conflict over marauding deer on crofting ground

Crofting is important in the south and east of the DMG area and several estates, notably Tressady, Dalreavoch and Gartymore, have considerable area under crofting tenure. Relatively fertile crofting ground tends to draw deer in from the surrounding areas, causing conflict with agricultural activities. An unknown number of deer are being removed by crofters each year, in an unselective cull which is likely to include many mature stags.

Deer – vehicle collisions

There are issues with RTAs involving deer on the A9 between Brora and Helmsdale and around the Mound, as well as deer-train collisions along the railway line between Kinbrace and Helmsdale. Although recent fencing on Kintradwell and Crakaig has reduced collisions along this stretch of the A9, but the extent of over-spill at the end of the fence line at Portgower is as yet unclear.

Loss of wintering ground

Up-take of woodland plating schemes has considerably reduced the availability of wintering ground on several estates. Although in some cases displacement culls have taken place, there have been additional changes in the distribution and dynamics of deer, including dispersal to neighbouring estates. The rate at which older woodland blocks are being opened up is insufficient to compensate for newly fenced areas.

Deer counting

While most estates conduct a count in most years, there is consistently poor co-ordination between estates particularly regarding the date of counting. Counts are not conducted as collaborative counts and a lack of capacity means that counting rarely occurs simultaneously across the whole Group. Differences in weather conditions across the area and competing interests for time mean that counting is often spread over several weeks leading to the possibility of considerable over- or under-counting, the degree of which is unknown.

In addition, there are gaps with some properties never counting, and others counting in only some years. Many employees question the thoroughness of counts in some areas. So while the counting ethos and intent within the Group is generally very good, there are some questions over the outputs obtained, and the analysis then drawn from these. This

particularly applies to the quality of the classification by age and sex class which is vital for understanding the dynamics of the population.

Lack of collaborative management

There is currently a lack of collaborative management within the Group. A number of employees within the area have a wide range of expected functions that compete for time, especially on estates that also manage livestock. This means there are localised capacity issues, both for stalking and carrying out deer counts. Furthermore, where designated sites lie across multiple properties, there is a tendency for responsibility to slip between neighbours. A more collaborative approach, possibly with additional input, is required to maintain tighter control on deer numbers in some areas.

Under-culling of hinds

There appears to be an increasing tendency towards under culling of the hind population. A number of factors are contributing to this, the collaborative management / capacity issue raised above being one of them. In addition, there has been a series of years of high recruitment between 2012 and 2015 and hinds have been in good condition. This makes the stalkers' job of choosing which animals to remove in a management cull harder and, as there is a temptation not to shoot individuals in good condition, the hind population has been allowed to gradually creep up.

Fragmentation of the deer range

A series of deer fences have been erected in the east of the DMG area to exclude deer from regenerating woodland / new planting schemes and to prevent movement eastwards. Consequently properties in the eastern tip of the DMG have become almost completely isolated from the rest of the Group and dynamics in this area have been disrupted. We have therefore proposed the creation of a new additional sub-group (East Sub-group; see 3. above) comprising Torrish, Torrish Woods, Crakaig, Culgower, West Garty and Gartymore as indicated on: **4. ES DMG Proposed new Sub-area structure map.**

Habitat monitoring capacity is low

The uptake of habitat monitoring within the area is low, with only a few estates having started this in recent years. Nonetheless, a number of estates recognise the need to carry this out and are willing to start. Although some estates have taken part in a training day, a number have expressed the need for further training and / or additional help during the first years. A monitoring plan will be an important part of this process going forwards.

Non-participating members

There are a few properties around the periphery of the DMG area who do not participate fully in the Group, and that includes their engagement with this planning process. Together these estates accounted for around 20% of the total 2014/15 cull. Engagement within the East Sub-group is particularly poor. It is recommended that these properties are regarded as Reporting Members of the Group, contributing cull data on an annual basis, and perhaps coming to some arrangement over counting practice if this is relevant in their particular circumstances.

The low uptake of the SQWV standard within the area

There are many very good quality and modern larders within the DMG area, with the majority of estates having access to chilling facilities. However, FE are the only members of the SQWV scheme in the area. This lack of SQWV uptake is unparalleled elsewhere in Scotland. Following the *E. coli* outbreak in the autumn of 2015, greater scrutiny of the

venison supply chain can be anticipated, increasing the need to focus on addressing SQWV uptake in East Sutherland.

Deer breaking into forestry

Following a break-in of hill deer into FE Naver plantation in 2009/10, a large number of deer, including mature stags, were culled out of season, creating conflict between sporting estates and forestry managers. Subsequently an agreement has been reached between ADMG and FCS whereby estates will be notified in the event of future break-ins and given the opportunity to help get deer of plantations. A related issue arises where stalking tenants of forestry blocks are alleged to have deliberately cut fences allowing access to hill deer which are subsequently shot in the forest by commercial clients of the stalking tenant. However, the extent to which this happening is unknown. In addition, there is some conflict where fence lines are due for replacement.

9. OTHER DEER SPECIES

Within East Sutherland DMG area, sika and roe deer are found in addition to red deer. There are currently no fallow deer in the area.

9a. SIKA DEER

Sika are well established in forestry plantations within ESDMG, particularly Dalchork where significant numbers are shot each year (Fig. 9). Anecdotal evidence suggests that large numbers also occur in Sciberscross and sika are increasingly seen on neighbouring estates. Of the 44 sika deer shot on non-FE ground since 2006/07, 40 were shot within the SE Sub-group and 4 in the NW Sub-group. Overall 70% were stags.

Fig. 9. Sika deer culled within FE properties (Dalchork & Naver) and elsewhere within ESDMG (Other), 2005/06 – 2014/15

Over the last 10 years, the number of sika shot in Dalchork has more than doubled and the sika cull as a percentage of deer of all species shot there has increased from 32% to 57%. During this period, culls of all classes of sika in Dalchork and Naver have increased but the number hinds shot has increased most strongly such that now almost as many hinds are shot as stags (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10. Sika deer cull summary for FE properties Dalchork & Naver, 2005/06 – 2014/15

Sika Deer Management Issues

The main issue relating to sika deer is their potential for hybridisation with red deer. Most open hill estates have a shoot-on-sight policy towards sika but as numbers appear to be increasing so is the risk of hybridisation, particularly as 2nd generation hybrids are virtually indistinguishable from red deer.

Within forestry plantations there are no plans to shoot out the current sika population which will be kept within acceptable limits while delivering sporting and venison requirements. There is no suggestion that the level of damage due to sika deer is a significant problem, although the forest age structure within the Dalchork plantation is such that on-going heavy culling of this species will be required.

9b. ROE DEER

Small populations of roe deer occur on lower ground towards the periphery of the DMG area, particularly to the south and in wooded areas. There is a significant population in Dalchork plantation. A few properties make sporting use of roe deer, with the biggest annual cull in Dalchork and only occasional roe shot in the East and North-west Sub-groups (Fig. 11). Numbers of roe deer shot in Dalchork have declined in recent years but this is likely to reflect changes in stalking effort as much as changes in population size.

Roe Deer Management Issues

There are not considered to be any significant roe deer management issues within the group area at present, although browsing by roe deer contributes to the impact of deer in unfenced woodland areas. Consequently there are potential issues relating to impacts on the native pinewood feature at Loch Fleet SSSI and on black grouse recovery more generally. An awareness of the roe deer population size needs to be maintained and numbers should not be allowed to escalate.

Fig. 11. Total number of roe deer culled across East Sutherland DMG, summarized by subgroup and showing Forest Enterprise (FE) separately, 2006/07 – 2014/15.

10. MOORLAND MANAGEMENT

A very large proportion of the DMG area can be described as moorland of one type or another, ranging from the very extensive peatlands, through wet heath and dry heath to complex mosaics interspersed with each other and with other habitats. Much of this area is under conservation designation, as described elsewhere. A requirement for many of these sites is that muirburning is not carried out, although heather cutting is carried out in limited areas. Elsewhere within the DMG area, muirburn is widely practised by the majority of estates. Localised heather beetle and winter moth outbreaks have both been reported, affecting heather condition in some parts of the DMG area. Contrary to common belief, burning is not likely to be effective against the heather beetle as the damaging beetle grubs are not present during the legal burning season and both the adults and eggs are protected below ground. However, burning may help to control moths.

Large, landscape-scale wildfires have periodically occurred in the wider area. Some of these have been started deliberately to help with sheep or deer grazing, but in other cases the cause remains unknown. Such fires cause damage to vulnerable peatlands which can take decades to recover as re-vegetation is very slow. Uncontrolled fires also allow bracken to spread, which is particularly noticeable in Strathnaver and they leave a fairly impoverished ground vegetation with areas of bare peat which are more vulnerable to deer tracking and browsing.

A few estates within the DMG manage moorland for red grouse in addition to sheep and deer. This tends to be a small-scale land-use with modest sporting use made of red grouse where and when numbers allow.

11. HILL SHEEP & CATTLE MANAGEMENT

Sheep are managed within the DMG under a variety of systems including owner occupied farms, grazing agreements, sheep stock clubs and Common Grazing Committees managing sheep on the hill ground under crofting tenure and individual crofters managing sheep on

their own in-bye ground. Many estates away-winter their hoggis. There are also large swathes of the DMG area that carry no sheep at all.

There are currently around 6,000 hill ewes, primarily North Country Cheviots, on 10 estates (Table 4) but this may be an incomplete count and numbers on Morivch, Crakaig, West Garty / Culgower and Gartymore are unknown. In addition, several estates on the periphery of the DMG area experience grazing by stray sheep from neighbouring flocks.

Table 4. Current numbers of hill ewes and followers, excluding lambs, within ESDMG compared with approximate numbers around 20 years ago (excluding Morivch, Crakaig, West Garty / Culgower & Gartymore).

ES DMG Sub-group	2015	1990s
North-west	2,155	3,750
South-east	3,175	7,625
East	890	950
Total sheep	6,220	12,325
Change to 2015		-49.5%

Sheep numbers have changed little over the past 10 years but are around half of those grazed in the area about 20 years ago. Reductions in sheep stocks of 50% are very significant over a 20 year period, both in lowering the overall herbivore grazing pressure and in lowering the overall amount of related employment in the area. A high proportion of the sheep that were removed came from estates in the interior of the Group area, meaning that now deer have more exclusive use of the interior ground. As nearly all the sheep reductions took place during the 1990s, the consequences for changes in the dynamics and distribution of deer are likely to have now worked their way through the system.

The distribution of sheep can be seen on [6. ESDMG Sheep Distribution Map](#).

Cattle

A number of properties keep cattle, although many are restricted to in-bye ground only. There are around 150 cattle plus followers kept within the area, although the greater number of these only graze the hill pastures during the summer months.

12. FORESTRY & WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

There are over 15,373 ha of woodlands within the East Sutherland area, much of which is laid out as commercial conifers, and is genuinely productive. Forest Enterprise manage a large proportion of this, but there is a significant area of private forestry as well. Other than FE Dalchork, the greater part of the woodland area lies towards the eastern part of the DMG, and in this area, deciduous woodlands play a very important part in the local landscape character. A high proportion of conifer plantations have been felled and restocked in recent years, or are due to be restocked in the near future. This is due partly to the age structure of the woodland resource, but also due to sanitation fellings to prevent the spreads of red band needle blight (RBNB), and also the recent winds which blew down some very significant areas of conifers along the Helmsdale. Overall, there is therefore a very high level of active management within the current woodland resource.

There have been almost 5000 ha of new woodland created within the DMG over the last 20 years or so, a very significant increase in the overall resource in a relatively short period.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY DEER POLICIES

SNH Authorisations

Members will be encouraged to share information within their Sub-group on any out of season and night shooting authorizations, over some or all of the land where they carry out deer control.

The vast majority of deer are culled in season, but deer marauding on crofts in spring and the need to control sika deer are important considerations in maintaining some flexibility within the group area.

Winter Mortality

Members will monitor and report any significant levels of winter mortality to the Sub-group, or any significant health issues encountered. It is considered that mortality within the group is approximately 2% for adults and 6% for calves in their first year, although this can increase very significantly in wet winters or after very late springs. Recruitment appears to be in the range of 35-40%, although this can be much less after poor weather (see 8a. above) These figures are used in the current population models for ES DMG ([Appendix 7](#)), although going forwards they should be verified with specific recruitment counts.

Deer Related Traffic Incidents

It is agreed by the Members that they will keep records of any collisions between deer and cars, trains or other vehicles in their area, together with relevant information (eg. location, species of deer, fate of deer, damage to vehicle, human injuries), while also recording dead deer in their annual cull returns and where appropriate, on larder sheets. Members may also wish to contribute to the national project collating RTA reports which can be accessed at <http://www.deercollisions.co.uk>.

There are known collision issues on the A9 (see 8c. above). The Group will liaise with Community Council representatives in an attempt to alleviate these.

Deer Fences

Much of the interior of the Group area has no fences. However, most significant woodland areas are fenced off from deer, although there are issues regarding the state of some fence lines that need repair or replacing (see 8c. above). There are also many new fences associated with woodland planting schemes. These have significantly reduced the availability of wintering ground in some parts of the Group as the areas being fenced are greater than those being opened up for deer access (see 8c. above).

All known deer fences are included on [18. ESDMG Deer fences Map](#) but some may still need to be added to this map and it will be important to keep all relevant information up-to-date.

Group members will take account of the Joint Agency Fencing Guidelines:

<http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/B768068.pdf>.

Supplementary/ diversionary Feeding

There are 9 estates in the Group that feed deer, although Altnaharra and Torrish only provide feed on ground outside the boundaries of ESDMG area. In addition, deer on Clebrig help themselves to supplementary feed intended for sheep. The feedstuffs typically provided

are: baled hay or silage, Rumevite / mineral blocks, beet or malting pellets and potatoes. On most estates it is mainly stags which take the feed. The rationale for feeding varies between properties but for many the main aims are to prevent deer from straying onto agricultural /crofting ground or the railway. In a few cases, feed is provided for welfare reasons but this is likely to be an indication that deer numbers are too high for the amount of available natural forage and / or shelter.

Members currently feeding deer on ground within the DMG are:

Badanloch

Balnacoil

Borrobol

Dalnessie

Kildonan

Loch Choire

Tressady

Members agree that they will inform the Group if any significant changes are made to current practice. All deer feeding which takes place will comply with industry Best Practice guidance.

Venison Marketing

Larder provision within the group is good with all estates expecting to have access to high quality larders by the 2016 stag season, most with chillers. Group members share a commitment to high standards beyond the larder door but despite the high standard of larders, uptake of the venison quality assurance scheme (SQWV) is limited to Forest Enterprise. As a matter of general principle, members also support the local consumption of locally shot, high quality venison.

Non-Native Species

At present, as well as the native red and roe deer, there are significant numbers of sika deer within the DMG boundary. There are no fallow deer in the area and no known plans to introduce any.

Sika Deer

Sika deer are present in fairly significant numbers within woodland areas of the Group, with annual culls now in excess of 200 animals. Sika are therefore valued within the area both for sporting purposes and for venison, and it is anticipated that this will remain the case.

The group policy on sika deer will therefore be to treat the species as a valued venison and sporting animal, but to try and confine them to the woodland areas where they presently occur. Stalkers beyond these areas are therefore asked to remove all sika deer as and when opportunities arise.

Other non- native species

Sightings of any other deer species, notably muntjac, will be reported immediately to both the DMG and to Scottish Natural Heritage, and efforts made to remove such animals.

There are some wild goats in the south of the area.

14. COMMUNICATIONS POLICY & CONTACTS

The East Sutherland DMG is committed to the transparent communication of all relevant information to its members, to government agencies and to the public more widely, with the caveat that some sensitive data will be distributed to Group members only.

The primary source of information about the Group will be on its own dedicated website, on which all information relevant to the Group can be located. This will include the deer management plan and associated maps, a constitution, minutes of group meetings, and population models.

The link for this website is: <http://esutherlanddmg.deer-management.co.uk>

All enquiries to the Group should be made through the Group Secretary via email, or if necessary, via phone to the Group Chairman. Their contact details are:

East Sutherland DMG Contact Details

Tom Chetwynd, Chair
Tel: 01224 971 121
tchetwynd@savills.com

Robbie Rowantree, Secretary/ Administrator
Tel: 01408 621 345
Robert.rowantree@btinternet.com

The contact details for individual properties will not be available as a matter of course through the Deer Group or website, although the Secretary can put enquirers in touch with the relevant people if appropriate to do so. No cull information on individual properties will be made available outwith the membership of the Group and SNH.

Every effort will be made to deal with non-emergency issues within 10 days. More pressing issues will be dealt with promptly if appropriate.

For more long established or strategic issues, it may be appropriate for the issue to be brought up at annual deer management group meetings. The Chairman may recommend this. The annual meeting will be an open meeting to which anyone is entitled to attend. Items for inclusion on the Agenda for such meetings must be submitted to the Group Chairman three weeks in advance of the meeting, otherwise they can be taken up under "Any Other Business". Any item that is not deemed appropriate for discussion on the Agenda will be addressed in some other appropriate fashion. Please respect the judgement of the Chairman if his view is that, in the first instance, an issue should be dealt with outside a formal group meeting. This may be because of time pressures, or the nature of the issue at hand.

All local Community Councils and other relevant parties will be made aware of meetings in advance, and invited to contribute to the agenda. Local input on the continuing evolution of the group Deer Management Plan is welcomed and encouraged. Email contacts and addresses for local community councils are included in Appendix 2. These details are not being made public through the website, but are available on request to Group members and community interests as required.

Any queries about the running of the DMG can be addressed to Scottish Natural Heritage at any of the contact points listed below:

Scottish Natural Heritage Contact Details

David Patterson (Operations Officer – Sutherland), Scottish Natural Heritage, The Links, Golspie Business Park, GOLSPIE, KW10 6UB.

Tel. 0300 067 3108

David.Patterson@snh.gov.uk

[Holly. Deary@snh.gov.uk](mailto:Holly.Deary@snh.gov.uk) is the SNH deer officer for the North Highland and also partly seconded to the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), leading on collaborative deer management across the country.

For more general deer enquiries: wildlifeops@snh.gov.uk

East Sutherland DMG will seek to respond to any requests from media sources or the local public for information, and individual members may arrange, from time to time, appropriate open days and information events if these are requested or deemed to be useful.

East Sutherland DMG welcomes comment on all matters either directly or indirectly associated with deer management within the Group area.

15. TRAINING POLICY

East Sutherland DMG will encourage and facilitate the attainment of all qualifications and training necessary for the delivery of effective deer management within their area of operation, and support continuing professional development through the adoption of Best Practice Guidance and other relevant courses.

The recognized and recommended industry standard for culling deer is that all personnel involved in deer management should attain Deer Stalking Certificate level 1 (DSC1) or equivalent. As of February 2016, 28 (80%) of the 35 full-time or seasonal employees involved in deer management in the East Sutherland DMG have obtained this qualification.

The DSC Level 2 qualification is increasingly held as the de facto industry standard for professional stalkers, which requires the identification, stalking, dispatching and larding of deer under supervision. In February 2016, 17 (49%) of the 35 personnel involved in deer management in the East Sutherland held the DSC Level 2 qualification.

For those expected to larder deer and prepare them for the human food chain, industry requirements are that they have attained Trained Hunter status. This is achieved with any DSC course passed after 2006, or an upgraded version of DSC1 passed before that time.

At November 2015, 27 or 77% of the 35 personnel involved in deer management within the area had trained hunter status. In practice in this DMG, those without this status tend to be working under the supervision of those who do, and it is likely that some of those who say they do not hold this status will simply be unaware of the exact definition of it.

All personnel requiring to take deer under special authorizations, such as at night or out of season, must be on the SNH “Fit & Competent” register. The requirement for this is to hold the DSC Level 2 qualification, or DSC Level 1 plus two references. In February 2016, 14 personnel in the East Sutherland area were on the Fit & Competent register. This relatively low number reflects the fact that the vast majority of deer within the area are culled in season and during daylight hours.

All personnel within the area are encouraged to be proficient in First Aid, manual handling, ATV driving and maintenance, and other tasks which are central to their job. East Sutherland DMG will monitor the level of skills among staff in the DMG area, and undertake to facilitate any such courses or training that may be necessary to put right any deficiencies that are identified. All estates will support their staff in attaining the agreed

standards.

Group members are encouraged to bring forward any suggestions for suitable training that might be of relevance to the Group as a whole, or to ask for support in arranging training for their staff. The most relevant training going forwards is likely to be in relation to habitat surveying and monitoring work. While many group members are already capable of doing this, others will require some structured training, and the management of such activity across the area will be an important function for the group to be able to undertake.

16. REVIEWING THE PLAN

This Plan provides an agreed framework for a co-ordinated and co-operative approach to deer management in the area. The actual implementation of the Plan will be decided on an ongoing basis at the Group's spring and autumn meetings, with scope for the Membership to adjust and adapt the Plan to meet changing circumstances. To achieve this, the Plan, with its attendant maps and databases, will be published on a dedicated DMG website. The ethos behind this plan is that it will be regularly updated, perhaps twice a year, and therefore it is impracticable to circulate hard copies of the plan.

Group members are encouraged to report all changes in contact details, personnel or management practices that might be relevant to the Group, or any potential upcoming projects that might affect deer management within the area, even if such proposals are still at a planning stage.

The population models and maps will be updated by the Group on an annual basis as required, with the former adjusted so that it is always looking five years ahead. The Members agree that there will be a more systematic review of the Plan and its provisions during autumn 2020 and thereafter, 2025, and, if considered necessary, the production of a revised edition of the Plan will be actioned at those times.

Part Four - OPERATION OF THE GROUP

East Sutherland DMG has been assessed against the DMG Benchmark document developed by the Association for Deer Management Groups. In this section of the plan, an account is given of how the Group currently meets the recommended operating criteria and, where appropriate, correcting or amending actions are listed.

1. Area & Boundaries

The boundaries of the area generally make sense in terms of the hill population of deer, although deer can freely move across those to the north-east and south. There has been some discussion over the northern boundary with Northern DMG between Loch Rimsdale and Kinbrace. However, it seems generally agreed that this should run along the northern edges of Loch Rimsdale, Loch Nan Clar, Loch Badanloch and Loch Achnamoine and along the Helmsdale River, rather than following the road.

There is currently no formalised deer management group to the south of the Group across Strath Fleet, although this is under discussion. Given the significant area of deer range to the south and the somewhat different land management priorities and deer management issues there, it would probably be more appropriate for a new South Sutherland group to be established than to extend the southern boundary of East Sutherland DMG.

The location of the group is shown on **1. ES DMG Location map**

Deer fences erected to the east of the Group mean that properties in the eastern tip of the DMG have become almost completely isolated from the rest of the Group. It is therefore recommended that the sub-group structure is modified to create a third sub-group. The proposed new structure is illustrated at: **4. ES DMG Suggested new Sub-area structure map**.

Action Points

- 1.1 Clarify location of the northern boundary in NW corner of Group so that properties there are aware of which group to report to.
- 1.2 Adopt the proposed new sub-group structure at 2016 meeting
- 1.3 Monitor the situation to the south and co-operate as required. During the production of this plan, an open meeting will be organized to establish the relationship of the ground to the south with the main ESDMG area.

2. Membership

There are several landholdings within the area who do not participate fully in the Group and do not pay subscriptions or participate in Group counts. Deer management is probably not the primary concern of these properties, but it would be helpful to the Group to have better knowledge of what happens there. It is recommended that properties that are not full members be recruited as Reporting Members, and that cull returns are sought from them for 2015-16 and future years.

In addition, there are fenced areas of forestry, primarily around the periphery of the Group, where stalking is being carried out. As fences may be porous and an unknown number of hill deer are shot in forestry, it would help population modelling if cull data were available for these properties. Furthermore, greater transparency and the opportunity for stalkers to interact at DMG meetings may help reduce any potential conflicts. The inclusion of the

following properties as reporting members would merit consideration: Craggie / Doulay, Lairg Estate, Rosal Forest, Sciberscross, Torrish Woods.

These properties, along with full members, can be seen on: **2. ES DMG Members Map.**

Action Points

2.1 During 2016, recruit non-participating estates as Reporting Members of ESDMG

2.2 During 2016, encourage the above mentioned forestry properties to become Reporting Members of ESDMG

2.2 Collate 2015-16 cull data for these properties and distribute to ESDMG members.

3. Meetings

The Group already meets annually for an autumn AGM, with additional meetings as required to deliver and analyse counts in spring. Attendance at meetings is generally good and SNH and FE usually attend. The Group has demonstrated an ability to carry out business between meetings. Going forward, a steering group needs to be elected to deliver the action points raised by the Plan. The Group Chair and Vice-chair belong to NW and SE-Sub-groups respectively but there are no office bearers within the proposed new East Sub-group.

Action Points

3.1 Continue to hold annual meetings and look to encourage wider community participation, including invitations to community councils to attend meetings from this year onwards. All external parties to be given the opportunity to contribute to the agenda of meetings

3.2 Group to consider how to make the proposed new East Sub-group work, including securing necessary personnel to run this sub-group

3.3 Create a steering group to take Management Plan forward and deliver action points.

4. Constitution & Finances

There is no existing constitution, but this has been addressed as part of this management planning process.

Action Points

4.1 A constitution to be adopted at next 2016 Group meeting.

4.2 Introduce a budgeting system prior to autumn 2016 AGM for the following financial year.

5. Deer Management Plan

This Plan replaces a previous one that was drawn up in 2010. SNH and Group members have ensured that all the relevant elements of an approved plan are in place now, and it is expected that the Plan will be endorsed at 2016 Group Meeting. A full range of local interests have been consulted on deer management issues within the area, including community councils and the local authority.

Action Points

5.1 Endorse DMP at 2016 meeting following consultation on the draft plan

5.2 Ensure a system of communications is in place whereby local interests have access to

the Plan, and can input to its future development. To achieve this, the Plan will be published on a dedicated DMG website. The ethos behind this plan is that it will be regularly updated, at least once a year, and therefore it is impracticable to circulate hard copies of the plan.

6. Code of Practice on Deer Management

The code has been endorsed in both this plan and in the constitution of the Group. The terms of the Code will be delivered through implementation of this plan, and the Code will guide all actions taken by the group and by individual members.

Action Points

6.1 Ensure adherence to code at all times, both by the Group, and by individual members.

6.2 At all subsequent meetings, Group members will have the opportunity to raise any issues relating to deer welfare or other problems that they are aware of within the Group. In all cases, members are encouraged to bring the issue up with those responsible in the first instance, or to seek the advice of the Group Chairman.

7. ADMG Principles of Collaboration

The ADMG principles of collaboration are accepted and endorsed by the Group and by individual members, namely:

- We acknowledge what we have in common, namely a shared commitment to a sustainable and economically viable Scottish countryside.
- We make a commitment to work together to achieve that.
- We accept that we have a diversity of management objectives and respect each other's objectives.
- We undertake to communicate openly with all relevant parties.
- We commit to negotiate and, where necessary, compromise, in order to accommodate the reasonable land management requirements of neighbours.
- Where there are areas of disagreement we undertake to work together to resolve them.

These principles are also referenced in the ES DMG constitution.

8. Wild Deer Best Practice Guidance

All deer management within the Group area will be carried out in accordance with Best Practice guidance, and group members will input to this process and seek to influence it as it continues to evolve.

9. Data & Evidence gathering- Deer Counts

Deer counting takes place within the Group in late winter / early spring on a regular and systematic basis. However, co-ordination of timing is poor, some areas are repeatedly missed, and limited man-power means many estates are currently counted by a single person. Consequently the quality of the counting is questioned by some members. Furthermore, the accuracy of count classification is questionable and a high proportion of deer are reported as 'unclassified'. These factors under-mine the usefulness of the data and

jeopardise confidence in estimated densities. However, a good counting ethos exists, and this should be built on. If a good level of practice can be adopted by all Group members, then a much better dataset should be obtained that is more useful for planning purposes.

Action Points

- 9.1 *Appoint a count co-ordinator in each sub-group to be responsible for ensuring all personnel are briefed on count date and that the necessary capacity is available for a thorough collaborative count of the entire sub-group. Additional help likely to be required by a number of estates is to be sought.*
- 9.2 *Group to extend counting practice to cover all members by spring 2017*
- 9.3 *Undertake a helicopter count within the period of this plan and thereafter at regular intervals as required, relying on population modelling in between to set cull targets on an annual basis. Such counts may involve a degree of private or SRDP funding.*
- 9.4 *Group members need to carry out thorough and consistent recruitment counts on an annual basis to inform the population model. Such counts should take place in the final week of April/ first week of May, and the recruitment % is the no. of calves expressed as a proportion of the no. of hinds, two years or older.*

10. Data & Evidence Gathering- Culls

There is good and consistent cull data collation within the Group going back to 2004. It is anticipated that this should continue. Data will be more complete if the series of Reporting Members can be added to the Group. It is necessary to build on the collection of roe and sika deer cull data that has been taking place in the past few years. Data collection summaries should be adjusted to allow for the new sub-group structure and reporting management units on some properties.

Action Points

- 10.1 *Update the population models and target culls on an annual basis, using recruitment and mortality data collected, as well as actual culls from the previous year*
- 10.2 *All cull data to be collated promptly at end of season*
- 10.3 *Cull data to include roe and sika deer, and to include data from new reporting members*
- 10.4 *Cull summary to reflect new sub-group structure and reporting units.*

11. Data & Evidence Gathering- Habitat Monitoring

Habitat monitoring activity is poor within the DMG area, with very few personnel involved in this. This is an area of weakness that should be addressed during the period of this plan, and it will involve a period of training for estate staff.

Action Points

- 11.1 *A schedule of habitat and designated site monitoring will be provided in the Working Plan*
- 11.2 *The Group will investigate taking forwards an ECAF/ SRDP application to fund part of this, and to co-ordinate the interpretation of the data collected. A proposal will be assessed in full at the autumn meeting of ESDMG.*
- 11.3 *Updated sheep information will be attained from group members for 2020 and 2025, in line with the data gathered since 1995.*

12. Competence

Of the 35 personnel involved in deer management within the DMG area, the following qualifications are held:

DSC Level 1:	28
DSC Level 2	17

27 personnel hold trained hunter status, and 14 are on the SNH “Fit and Competent” register. Note: in this latter case, personnel only need to be on the register if they are applying to cull deer under authorisation at night or out of season. As many stalkers within the group do not apply for such authorisations, they are not required to be on the register.

Office bearers from the DMG have attended courses ran by the Association of Deer Management Groups in relation to operation and leadership within local groups.

Action Point

12.1 DMG members will seek to ensure that DSC Level 1 and Trained Hunter status are delivered as the now accepted industry standard within the area, and encouragement will be given to professional stalkers to achieve DSC level 2.

12.2 Training or support in higher level qualifications will be encouraged where that is appropriate.

13. Training

A Training Policy is included earlier in this document.

Action Points

13.1 Group to promote and facilitate the uptake of appropriate deer management qualifications by all Group members

13.2 Be aware of the ongoing development of Best Practice Guidance and any new techniques or standards that arise from that

13.3 Review training needs on an annual basis.

14. Venison Marketing

While the quality of deer larders across the DMG is good, the uptake of the Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) scheme is exceptionally poor within the area, with no private estates carrying this status. This is probably the lowest uptake of the SQWV scheme within the deer range in Scotland. The perceived bureaucracy surrounding this seems to be a significant limiting factor rather than poor facilities or skills. The Group should consider carefully how this particular issue might be addressed.

Action Points

14.1 The DMG will work with ADMG to better understand why SQWV scheme uptake here is so poor and thereafter promote uptake within the area

14.2 In the medium term, beyond the settling in period for this Plan, the DMG will explore options to market venison from the area in a more collaborative manner.

15. Communications

A Communications policy is included in an earlier section of this document.

It is important that all Group members receive the same information. Most communication is now carried out electronically but a strategy is required to ensure that those not on email / internet are kept informed. The annual communications strategy will involve making all relevant documents available through a dedicated DMG website and also the ADMG website, including the opportunity to contribute to the Agenda of meetings, holding one open meeting a year, answering all requests for information from the media and arranging open days or demonstration events where these are appropriate.

All local stakeholders, including community councils have been consulted on the development of this plan. See [7. ES DMG Community Councils Map](#)

Action Point

15.1 Implement the communications strategy as agreed, and ensure a mechanism is in place for dealing with business and issues between meetings

15.2 Encourage all Members to receive information electronically and, where this is not possible, ensure mechanisms are in place so that all Members receive the same information.

Part Five - PUBLIC INTEREST ACTIONS

East Sutherland DMG has been assessed against the DMG Delivery of Public Interest document developed by Scottish Natural Heritage and the Association for Deer Management Groups. In this section of the plan, an account is given of how the Group currently delivers public benefit and, where appropriate, correcting actions are listed.

PI 1. Develop mechanisms to manage deer

ESDMG has completed both the Benchmark and Public Interest assessments.

A series of actions have been identified to be taken forward in a Working Plan, and roles for implementing this have been assigned.

A forward looking deer management plan is in the process of development, and is expected to be endorsed in spring 2016. The plan plus associated documents, maps and minutes of meetings will be published on a dedicated DMG website space: <http://esutherlanddmg.deer-management.co.uk>.

Action points

PI 1.1 Publish and endorse the new East Sutherland Deer Management Plan in 2016.

PI 1.2 Re-assess the Group against both the Benchmark and the Public Interest criteria once DMP has been endorsed, and then annually thereafter.

PI 1.3 Review the Working Plan on an annual basis and minute progress and changes.

PI 2. Delivering designated features into favourable condition

Designated sites and features within the DMG are documented with **Appendix 3. ESDMG Designated Sites**. This includes an up to date account of their current status, and suggested actions through which a number of sites in Unfavourable condition can be brought forward in to assured management status.

There are several designated sites within the DMG area where deer contribute to the negative impacts noted.. Deer impacts on blanket bog sites are the most significant issue, particularly on Ben Klibreck and Skinsdale Peatlands SSSIs. In addition, the blanket bog feature on Truderscaig SSSI is believed to be in declining condition, while that on Badanloch Bogs SSSI will hopefully begin to improve in condition since the implementation of a management agreement there. In the case of most designated woodland sites, recent fencing now means that the majority of these are in recovering condition, although browsing, particularly by roe deer, continues to cause concern in Loch Fleet native pinewoods.

Action points

PI 2.1 Implement collaborative deer control across marches of neighbouring estates with shared responsibility for Ben Klibreck and Skinsdale Peatlands designated sites. External help should be sought as required to increase capacity and / or provide co-ordination. Funding is available through SRDP to support this if required. The population models associated with this plan will reflect and guide this process going forwards. There are accompanying property specific culls, targeted to key areas.

PI 2.2 Ben Klibreck SSSI is currently grazed by sheep and cattle, in addition to deer. The total herbivore stocking density is currently inappropriately high, requiring a

significant reduction in deer numbers and / or domestic stock in accordance with SNH recommendations.

PI 2.3 Report deer counts and culls on Loch Choire Estate separately for the north and south beat, to enable better monitoring of the management targeted on ground within Ben Klibreck SSSI.

PI 2.4 Reduce deer population on and adjacent to Skinsdale Peatlands SSSI to reach and maintain an overall density of 7-8 deer / km² within the SSSI, as recommended by SNH. Population models will reflect this approach.

PI 2.5 Within Loch Fleet native pinewoods, consider measures to allow more effective deer control such as creating open areas of ground attractive to deer and installing high seats.

PI 3. Manage deer to retain existing native woodland cover and improve woodland condition in the medium to long term.

There are approximately 15,373 ha of woodland within the East Sutherland DMG area, covering just less than 12.5 % of the area of the Group (National Forestry Inventory, NFI). This is low compared to the national average of c 18.5 %, but it reflects the very large area of moorland interior within the group. The woodland is concentrated mainly around the periphery of the Group, and woodland connectivity is in fact relatively good. The 15,373 ha includes all recently planted woodland, and Forest Enterprise woods.

Of this area, 3279 hectares or 21 % is composed of native or nearly native woodland (NFI), so the woodland resource is actually heavily dominated by non- native conifer plantations, with FES woodland taking up a large proportion of this. While conifer plantations are significant in private ground as well, including some very substantial areas, there is a much higher proportion of native woodland on private properties.

Of the total woodland area, 321 hectares or 2% is under an agreed management regime through an SRDP Forest Plan or Management Plan since 2008. There were 1559 hectares or 10% of the total area under an SFGS management plan from 2003-7. Given the high proportion of woods in this area within FE ownership, and the fact that much of the woodland area is still fairly young, this is a high level of woodland under active management in the SFGS period.

Only 189 ha has been under a felling licence 2012-14, and 535 ha from 1998- 2011. (Woodlands covered by a Forest Plan do not require a separate felling licence).

Of the total native woodland area of 3352 ha (NWSS; Note, this is slightly different to the 3279 ha figure given above), the following herbivore impact levels are currently given:

Low: 900 ha or 27 %

Medium: 1877 ha or 56%

High: 202 ha or 6%

Very High: 372 ha or 11%

83% of native woodlands therefore show low or medium herbivore impact levels. These areas are shown on [1. ESDMG Woodland Herbivore Impacts outwith Designated Sites map.](#)

For the 2473 ha of woodland that are outwith designated sites, have more than 90% native species, 50% canopy and less than 10% invasives, the following herbivore impacts are given:

Low: 749 ha or 30%

Medium: 1331 ha or 54%

High: 155 ha or 6%

Very High: 228 ha or 10%

13. ESDMG Woodland Herbivore Impacts outwith Designated Sites map.

Therefore, 84% of these woods that are otherwise in “satisfactory condition” outwith designated sites show low or medium herbivore impacts. This is in comparison to the 60% of such woodlands which Wild Deer- A National Approach (WDNA) envisage being in such condition by 2020.

There are 2 X clusters of native woodland areas at High or Very High impacts from herbivores, one near Rogart, and one along the Helmsdale river. In both cases, livestock pressure is likely to be the dominant impact. These sites are marked as 1 & 3 on the **14. ESDMG Key Woodland Herbivore Impact Map.**

Some additional analysis will be provided for these sites.

In addition, although they are actually inside a designated site, some additional analysis will be provided for the woodlands around Loch Choire. This area is marked “2” on the above map.

Action points

*PI 3.1. Ground truth and provide additional analysis for the above 3 X key woodland sites on **14. ESDMG Key Woodland Herbivore Impact Map.***

PI 4. Demonstrate DMG contribution to woodland expansion target

There has been a fairly significant increase in woodland area within the DMG over the past 20 years or so, with 1654 hectares being established under the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) since 2008, 167 hectares being established under the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme (SFGS) since 2003, and 2956 hectares being established under the Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) since 1994. See **Map 12. ESDMG Woodland Creation.**

This woodland expansion amounts to 4777 hectares in total, or 31 % of the woodland area today, which includes the extensive FE area. The proportional increase has therefore been very significant over twenty years or so, especially as a proportion of the woodland on private ground. Of the most recently planted woodland under SRDP, 1437 ha or 87 % consisted of native woodland planting. 11 ha of this was native woodland regeneration. There has been 41 ha of productive conifer planting and 164 ha of mixed conifer/broadleaved planting as well.

Looking ahead, the private owners within the Group have suggested that they could plant up to 210 ha of new native woodland within the period of this plan. This total is very modest, although others have hinted at woodland creation plans beyond the 10 year period, and this low figure should be seen in the context of significant plantings in the very recent past. It should also be noted that a very large proportion of the group area is dominated by blanket bog, and is therefore not appropriate for woodland planting.

Action points

PI 4.1 DMG members to take forwards up to 210 ha of new planting within the period of this plan.

PI 4.4 All to ensure that recently planted woodland areas become properly established.

PI 5. Monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside

Outwith the designated sites in the DMG area, there a range of broad habitat types which are listed below, with their areas, taken from the LCS88 dataset. A full summary of the habitat types can be found in the Excel spreadsheet: [Appendix 8. ESDMG Broad Habitat Data](#). This is a relatively good set of data for this area, but 3779 hectares or 3% of the area has been obscured by cloud, mostly within the higher and more remote areas of the DMG area, and mostly within designated sites.. The data is now over 25 years old.

The main habitats in the wider DMG area are:

56,123 ha of heather moorland, covering 45% of the DMG.

38,039 ha of blanket bog, covering 31% of the DMG.

589 ha of montane habitats, covering < 1% of the DMG.(NB A large area of DMG was obscured by cloud on survey)

6251 ha of improved pasture, covering 5 % of the DMG

4780 ha of upland grasslands, representing 4% of the DMG area.

10,859 ha of woodland, occupying approx 10% of the DMG. (1988 figure)

Finally, there are about 7027 ha of miscellaneous areas, including 3779 ha obscured by cloud cover, 2639 ha of open water, 52 ha of cliffs, 196 ha of built up areas, 176 ha of dunes, 142 ha of golf courses, 12 ha of quarries, 12 ha of caravan parks and a variety of small wetland and marsh sites

Action point

PI 5.1 An agreed monitoring programme for these habitats will be devised, to be endorsed and included in the Working Plan during 2016.

PI 6. Improve Scotland's ability to store carbon

Within the Group area there are approx 15,373 ha of woodland and 38,039 ha of peatlands.

It has already been noted that a high proportion of the native woodlands within the Group are in satisfactory condition, with 83% of all native and nearly native woodlands being at low or medium herbivore impact levels.

There is scope for creating up to 210 ha of new woodlands within the period of this plan.

The 38,039 ha of peatlands are, at 31 % of the area, a significant proportion of the DMG. The limited habitat surveys that have been done suggests that the majority of this is in favourable condition or recovering condition, although both the Skinsdale SSSI and Ben Klibreck SSSI peatlands are in unfavourable condition. A key function of this DMP will be to set population densities that are in keeping with the requirements of the peatland resource within the area, particularly the more valuable designated areas. A more widespread and structured monitoring programme needs to be put in place to check the condition of the peatlands over the DMG as a whole, and to monitor these over a period of time.

To date, no requests have been made to the Group to contribute to River Basin Management Planning within the DMG area

Action points

PI 6.1 Put in place a habitat monitoring scheme to determine the current status of blanket bogs within the area, and take action necessary to lower impacts on these as required.

PI 6.2 Implement the woodland creation schemes outlined above

PI 6.3 Discourage any burning that might impact on peatland sites.

PI 6.4 Contribute to River Basin Management Planning as appropriate when requests to do so are forthcoming.

PI 6.5 Consider taking any priority peatland sites forwards under the Peatlands Action programme, if applicable.

PI 7. Reduce or mitigate the risk of invasive, non-native deer species

A non- native deer policy is included earlier in this plan. This includes a section on sika deer, which are considered to be an asset to a number of properties within the DMG.

Action points

PI 7.1 Cull dispersing sika deer in order to contain the current population in the forest blocks already occupied by sika.

PI 7.2 Monitor woodland habitats occupied by sika to establish whether there is any evidence for sika numbers increasing there to unsustainable levels. This to be achieved by Group members, with advice from SNH as required. In practice, it is likely that an increasing population will export individuals to be culled in corridors on properties adjacent to occupied woodlands.

PI 7. Members to report any sightings of suspected muntjac deer to SNH.

PI 8. Protection of historic and cultural features

There are likely to be many hundreds of sites throughout the DMG area that have archaeological or cultural importance. It is likely that for the majority of these that light grazing by deer and sheep will be beneficial in keeping back rank vegetation growth. At present, the DMG are not aware of any cultural sites that are being negatively impacted by grazing. A greater threat to such features will be woodland creation projects that do not ensure adequate buffer zones around such features, or other development projects.

Action points

PI 8.1 The DMG will maintain communication with the local community and look to address any issues that are identified with regards to sites of cultural interest and herbivore grazing.

PI 8.2 As required by Forestry Commission, all potential woodland creation projects, including natural regeneration schemes, will be assessed by the applicants for any negative impacts on cultural or archaeological sites.

PI 9. Delivering higher standards of competence in deer management

A training policy and audit is provided earlier in this document. The DMG recognises that professional and well trained personnel are a key element of delivering public benefits.

Of the 35 personnel involved in deer management in the DMG, 28 have DSC Level 1, 17

have DSC Level 2, and 27 have trained hunter status. Fourteen personnel are on the Fit & Competent register, but this is a reflection of the low number of deer culled out of season or at night by estate staff. It should be noted that not all members of the Group are clear on how “trained hunter” status is defined or what the Fit & Competent register is.

Staff within the DMG area have a wide variety of other qualifications and certificates covering other aspects of their work. These include ATV, Argocat, First Aid, Chainsaw, and Health & Safety qualifications. Higher deer management qualifications are also held by some personnel, and one stalker is an accredited witness for DSC Level 2. Several group members have a close association with North Highland College and take on placement students. Others are associated with the British Deer Society, and have organized events within the area on their behalf.

Action points

PI 9.1 Continue to monitor qualifications held by estate staff, and promote a culture of continued professional training more widely.

PI 9.2 Ensure all Group members understand the definitions of “trained hunter” status and Fit & Competent register.

PI 10. Contribute to public health and wellbeing

Deer Vehicle Collisions are a particular issue on the A9 between Brora and Helmsdale and by the Mound, while a number of deer are killed by trains each year on the Helmsdale - Kinbrace line. New fencing has recently been erected north of Brora but the extent of over-spill at the end of the fence line is as yet unclear. New fencing is planned for the Mound area in 2018. There are several stretches of minor roads within the DMG where deer are well known to be in close proximity to the road at night, such as Strathnaver, but these are not regarded as being a significant problem as such.

Food safety and meat hygiene is best maintained through appropriate training and facilities, and a high proportion of personnel within the Group have Trained Hunter status. The quality of available larder facilities is extremely high and all properties operate their larders to Best Practice standards. However, there is a marked lack of private estates carrying SQWV status.

The Trained Hunter training allows personnel to be able to identify any notifiable diseases in deer found in the area. It is not thought that any such problems have been identified in recent years. If any incidences do occur, the carcass will be held back from the food chain and a veterinary surgeon asked to inspect.

Members are aware of the threat of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in deer being imported from North America. However, in April 2016, the first diagnosed case of CWD in Europe was reported in a reindeer in southern Norway. This potentially increases the risk of CWD being brought to UK and extreme vigilance is required. ADMG and BDS guidance on CWD has been circulated to the Group.

All members are reminded to be aware of the risk of, especially Lyme’s Disease. The risks of tick borne diseases should be communicated through suitable channels to guests and members of the public who might frequent their land.

There are relatively few access/ deer conflicts within the Group area, with local authorities being unaware of any significant issues. Any tensions that do arise tend to be with walkers from outwith the area heading to Ben Klebrig from the south-west.

It is considered that access management is not a priority consideration for the majority of

group members, and no particular action points are associated with this at the moment.

Action points

PI 10.1 Liaise with local Community Councils regarding DVCs, monitor effectiveness of new fencing north of Brora and consider whether further mitigation measures may be helpful in reducing local risk. Information on road accidents should be sent to www.deercollisions.co.uk.

PI 10.2 Ensure all DMG members are aware that Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) has now been reported in Norway, meaning that safety precautions must be taken by anyone who has had recent contact with deer or deer habitats in Norway as well as in North America. Re-circulate ADMG and BDS guidance on CWD to the Group before the 2016 stalking season and remind members of the dangers of CWD on an annual basis.

PI 10.3 DMG to highlight the risks of ticks and Lyme's Disease to their guests and the public more generally through all appropriate channels.

PI 10.4 Group members and DMG to promote a positive and welcoming message to all those visiting the area throughout the year.

PI 11. Maximize Economic benefits associated with deer

Assuming 500 stags a year are shot by sporting clients, it is estimated that the direct sporting value of the stag season in East Sutherland DMG area is around £200,000 annually.

In addition, around 15-20% of the hind cull is likely to be taken with sporting guests. The value of this might be £30-40,000 annually.

In both cases, extra value will be gained by a number of estates through letting of accommodation and other ancillary services. This can reasonably be expected to be equivalent to the letting fees outlined above. In total therefore, the sporting value of deer stalking in the area is likely to amount to something in the order of £470,000 per year.

Based on a cull of 600 stags, 1000 hinds and 300 calves (approx. 5y average cull, including FE), it is estimated that the total value of venison produced within the group area is around £217,000 annually. This does not take account of the fact that a number of properties market a proportion of their venison directly within the area, and a number of small game/ fish dealers operate in close proximity to the group.

The total direct economic value of deer management within the East Sutherland area is therefore likely to be in the region of £700,000 annually for red deer, with perhaps an additional £50,000 or so from sika and roe deer. This gives around £750,000 overall, before any economic multipliers are considered. The majority of sporting estates will also consider their overall capital value to be related to the numbers of sporting stags that can be shot.

Fishing, farming, forestry, grouse and low ground shooting and property letting are other valuable sources of income within the area, and employees involved with deer stalking will often be involved with this wider range of activities.

Within the DMG area, there are currently 35 personnel involved directly with deer management, of which 20 are full time employees. The remainder are primarily seasonal staff, and in many cases income from deer management allows the position as a whole to remain viable. This figure does not include ancillary staff dealing with accommodation, bookings or other necessary support services. The most significant other interests are livestock management and management of fisheries. Deer are often important in combination with these enterprises and can add value where, for example, fishing, stalking

and accommodation are closely integrated in to an overall package.

A few properties within the group who do not obtain any sporting value from deer management will regard such activity as an overall net cost to their own management objectives, and would no doubt readily forego any income derived from deer management. This cost will however largely be expressed in terms of wages spent in the local area.

Opportunities to add value to deer management

There may be opportunities to add value to deer management in the area either through deer watching tourism or by adding value to venison, for example through the SQWV scheme or other premium product outlets.

Wildlife tourism in Scotland is booming and those running hotels, B&Bs and other tourism ventures are likely to welcome opportunities to see wildlife in and around where they are based. Consequently there are chances to promote sporting and deer viewing opportunities through accommodation providers. It may also be the case that sporting opportunities should be more readily available to hotels in the area, and the DMG could potentially play a role in that.

Action points

PI 11.1 Increase awareness of the value of deer in and around areas of population, to emphasize the point that deer in these areas provide positive outcomes as well as some negative ones.

PI 11.2 Investigate the possibility for a local means of advertising sporting opportunities within the area during the first 2-3 years of this plan, initially through the new dedicated website for East Sutherland DMG.

Larder/ infra- structure sharing

There is already some degree of larder sharing within the DMG and the quality of larders in general is very good, although no private larders are quality assured.

Action point

PI 11.3 Maintain larder standards across the DMG area, and work with ADMG, SQWV and others to have larders within the area accredited.

PI 12. Minimize the economic costs of deer management

For most properties within the DMG area, deer management is one of several activities that they are involved in, and the costs of employing staff and maintaining houses and estate infra-structure will be spread across a number of different enterprises or interests, with staff undertaking different activities at different times of year. The proportions of time spent on different activities, including deer management, will vary between properties but no-one will spend all of their time on deer. Nonetheless, the overall infrastructure of staff, housing, roads and equipment must be maintained to allow deer management to be undertaken and to be effective.

There is no accurate data reflecting the costs of providing this within the DMG, nor should we anticipate that properties would try to differentiate out their costs relating solely to deer management in this way. Many larger businesses and organizations struggle to attribute their overheads in any significant manner between enterprises or areas of interest, and it would not be realistic to expect small, highly integrated rural businesses to do so.

At a DMG level, there are 20 full-time personnel directly involved in deer management as a

key part of their job. Terms and conditions will vary, but if an average cost of employing a staff member of £40,000 is used (to include vehicle costs, etc), then a broad brush cost of £800,000 could be attributed to maintaining the very basic infrastructure of staff and equipment within the area, necessary for allowing deer management to be delivered to a satisfactory level. In addition to this, there are an additional 15 seasonal stalking and ghillieing jobs in the area and in any one year, there will be very significant investments in upgrading buildings, tracks or facilities, to be used in conjunction with deer management or for other activities.

The cost of maintaining core staff within the area is somewhat greater than income brought in from deer alone (£800,000 vs £750,000 above), but this does not account for income from other sources, many of which are as important as deer. For example, income from fishing lets is significant on some properties while others run nationally renowned sheep flocks and in some cases these may be delivered by the same staff. The broad figures do not allow for economic multipliers within the local economy, and having a resident and reliable point of contact on these properties helps with overall maintenance and security of the properties and therefore protects their capital value as assets.

Almost all of the members of the DMG will regard the cost of employment and maintaining infrastructure as the necessary price that has to be paid to manage these properties, and income from deer is an important part of the funding equation. With other sources of income, most estates will be able to run as profitable businesses. Others will accept a net annual cost as being necessary to maintain or improve their overall asset.

Within the DMG area, there are a few properties where deer management would be regarded as more of a cost than an opportunity, although even on these, the distinctions may not be clear cut.

Forest Enterprise maintain full-time staff working across multiple properties and have extensive perimeter deer fences to be maintained against deer. There will be a considerable net cost to doing this.

SSE Gordonbush Windfarm has to manage and improve the area of habitat around the windfarm site. Deer management is a key part of this and will have an associated cost, although this is partly offset by the required grazing pressure exerted by deer.

Crofting ground to the south and east of the group is a powerful draw to deer, particularly in the spring months. Crofters have the right to protect their crops and grass against marauding deer, and there is no doubt that very significant damage can be caused by a large number of animals on a small area, even over one night. Although sheep numbers have declined over the past 20 years, competition from deer is still a considerable net cost to crofters. However, there are no data available on the extent of these costs. This is compounded by the fact that little or no information is collated on the number of deer culled on these properties. An important action to implement going forwards must therefore be to try and work with Grazing Committees to collate such information, determine the scale of any conflicts that exist, and see if action can then be taken to mitigate this.

Action points

PI 12.1 DMG to assess the current PACEC survey into the value/ costs of deer management and extract information from ESDMG in order to inform more fully the above narrative. Complete and adapt text as necessary by spring 2017.

PI 12.2 Engage with Grazing Committees to collate deer culls on lower ground, and see what management action might be employed to mitigate against unnecessary expense to crofters, and loss of deer to the deer management group as a whole. Set up

communication and reporting structures by spring 2017.

PI 13. Ensure effective communication in deer management issues

The Deer Management Plan, minutes of meetings and other relevant information is being made publically available through the Group's own dedicated website.

<http://esutherlanddmg.deer-management.co.uk>.

Grazing committees and local community councils are to be added to the circulation list as appropriate, and one meeting per year is to become an open meeting. These local groups will all be notified of meetings in advance and given the opportunity to contribute to the agenda.

Existing opportunities for community involvement and education are relatively limited and few private Group members provide interpretation facilities on their properties, although Highland Council, SNH and some local initiatives provide good access and interpretation of local features of cultural or historic value, or of key local landscapes or habitats.

Action Point

PI 13.1 Take forwards those actions outlined in the Communications Policy/ Working Plan by spring 2017.

PI 14. Ensure Deer welfare at individual and population level

It is not thought that there are any major issues relating to deer welfare at the moment, although there is some concern about the high mortality that can occur during winters of heavy snow fall. During such winters there is an associated increase in the number of deer killed by trains.

A number of properties feed deer in the winter months to protect vulnerable animals and to keep them away from potentially dangerous locations. More widely, achieving a deer density that allows habitats to move into favourable condition is likely to produce a more versatile and resilient natural food supply throughout the year, and reduce the need for artificial feeding.

The restocking and fencing of felled conifer plantations and fencing associated with woodland planting schemes is removing valuable winter shelter from some areas of the range. This is likely to have an impact on local deer populations in some areas. Some additional compensatory culling may be required on the back of this.

Training and levels of competence within the Group are generally good.

Action points

PI 14.1 Focus on bringing natural habitats into favourable condition status

PI 14.2 Liaise locally on significant woodland management operations where these affect shelter for deer, investigate opportunities for opening up woodlands for shelter and implement compensatory culls where significant losses in wintering ground occur

PI 14.3 Collect deer information, including larder data, within the Group as per agreed recommendations. This will provide animal-specific data which can be monitored and compared to identify potential welfare issues within the area

PI 14.4 Continue diversionary feeding above train line during winter and consider whether further mitigation measures such as opening up woodland shelter may be helpful in reducing local risk. Monitor and collect evidence of train mortality over the coming years to ascertain the true extent of the problem.