

**East Sutherland Deer Management Group
Practitioners Meeting**

**SNH Office, The Links, Golspie
Friday, 20 July 2018**

1.0 Present

Tom Chetwynd	- <i>Chair - ESDMG</i>	Sir Michael Wigan	- <i>Borrobol</i>
Robbie Rowantree	- <i>Gordonbush</i>	Neil Mackay	- <i>Loch Choire</i>
John Billett	- <i>Kintradwell</i>	Martin Grant	- <i>Kildonan</i>
Megan Rowland	- <i>Gordonbush</i>	Craig Symmer	- <i>Borrobol</i>
John Macdonald	- <i>Borrobol</i>	Leigh Hague	- <i>Ben Armine / Dunrobin</i>
Pieter Bakker	- <i>Vagastie</i>	Holly Deary	- <i>SNH</i>
Andrew Mackay	- <i>Dalnessie</i>	David Patterson	- <i>SNH</i>
Derick Macaskill	- <i>FES</i>		

2.0 Apologies

John McMorran	- <i>Balnacoil</i>	Robbie Milne	- <i>West Garty</i>
Andrew Nicholson	- <i>Clebrig</i>	Blair Colvin	- <i>Kintradwell</i>
Lorne MacNichol	- <i>Tressady</i>	James Urquhart	- <i>Ben Armine / Dunrobin</i>
Martin Macdonald	- <i>West Garty</i>		

3.0 Minutes

3.1 Minutes of Owners & Stalkers Meeting – 11 May 2018:

Minutes were approved with no changes – approved by Robbie Rowantree, seconded by Martin Grant

The Chair also circulated a copy of the minutes for the Practitioners Meeting held in July 2017 which had been produced to record culls agreed and discussion on habitat monitoring. It was proposed that in future a copy of minutes for all meetings will be lodged on ESDMG website.

4.0 Deer Management Plan

4.1 Population Model

The Population Models circulated at the May meeting were recirculated. This model is in two parts and is based on both the figures provided by members and the figures provided by Victor Clements within the Deer Management Plan adopted in 2017 for comparison. The latest survey figures showed reduced recruitment in Spring 2018 at 15% for ESDMG as a whole, following Winter 2017-18.

TC confirmed that the purpose of this meeting was to agree the stag cull for the 2018-19 season and the initial discussion focused on winter mortality, loss of calves and current calf numbers and whether the target population should be reached early or gradually.

RR reported that Gordonbush mortality had been low in mature animals but calf losses were high for 2017 cohort. Estimates for 2018 calving were at 25% at best which indicated 2 years of check for population. The gaps in these cohorts would continue to be evident for next 3 – 5 years. RR would be keen on phased approach.

Borrobol highlighted an agreement reached with SNH following habitat monitoring and an assessment of winter mortality to reduce the agreed cull from 80 to 40 stags.

JB reported that Kintradwell had identified 2018 calving on the coast at approximately 35% and that it dropped off to 25-30% inland. As a result the stag cull would probably be reduced.

NM reported that Loch Choire calving stood at 20% with the highest figures on low ground. MG reported calving at approximately 20% for Kildonan, CS at 25% for Balnacoil, LH at 20-25% for Sutherland Estates.

BL reported 15-18% for Badanloch and overall numbers now under 1000.

PB reported that Alltnahara reflected the rest of ESDMG at 18-20% but the western part of the estate was showing lower calving numbers for 2018.

AM still struggling to find mature stags following 2009-10 winter with recruitment at 12% and calving at 20%.

DM reported Dalchork at 20-25% for open hill and low mortality.

LM Tressady had reported to AM 24% calving.

Overall, these figures represented an average estimated calving of 25% for the SE and E Sub-Group and 20% for the NW Sub-Group for Summer 2018.

4.2 Stag Cull – 2018-19 Season

The following numbers were proposed for the 2018 stag cull:

Borrobol	40	Gordonbush	43 plus croft marauders
Kildonan	80-90	Kintradwell	35
Balnacoil	tbc	Dalchork	35
Dalreavoch	tbc	Alltnahara	4
Tressady	40	Clebrig	30
Dunrobin	tbc	Loch Choire	60-80
Dalnessie	27	Badanloch	15-18

Discussion followed on focusing culling on areas suffering impacts and where peatland restoration is being undertaken. It was also agreed that inter-estate communication is important during course of season. RR raised the matter that the group still had an imbalance in the stag:hind ratio and that the group could possibly go lightly on the stags whilst maintaining a reduction cull and bringing the population in balance at 1:1 ratio. He also felt that the group should focus more on hinds given that many will be yield this year leading to a pulse in calving in 2019 and that stags were overwintering in better condition than normally. He also mentioned that a fine-tuned approach should be taken to the reduction cull.

TC reminded the group that the target figure for ESDMG in 2022 was 4000 stags, 4000 hinds plus 2000 calves (Total 10,000) from a starting population in 2017 of 5,300 stags, 7,000 hinds and 2,600 calves (Total 15,000).

HD raised the issue of over-reacting to winter mortality and the ability of the population to bounce back and quickly. Discussion followed that if 2018-19 was a mild winter and the 2019 spring count showed higher recruitment culls could be stepped back up for the 2019-20 season.

It was generally felt by the members that by undertaking a careful and focused approach to the culls that both the welfare of deer as well as employment was being maintained. RR raised the winter matrix approach used in the US which started with a 50% average which could be used in UK models – to be proposed to ADMG. He felt that given it had been a long winter and poor summer so far with drought conditions weights would be lower. Discussion followed on what other information could be collected by a DMG and used to maintain the welfare of herd which is an ongoing point of discussion between ADMG and SNH in terms of the health checks. Ongoing discussion is required on what further information needs to be collected and used within the DMG to determine what is happening on the ground and the factors that may be influencing that.

It was also noted that although there is a larger sheet on the ESDMG website, a standard template had not been adopted for ESDMG. It was agreed that more data could be captured, and TC agreed to produce an updated sheet for circulation to members for approval. Once approved, enquiries would be made in to printing it on water-proof paper.

4.3 Habitat Monitoring

All members confirmed that they were now undertaking HIA in accordance with Best Practice Guidance with some members in to the second or third 3 year cycle of recording plots. Discussion was held on the survey interval which can range from 2-5 years depending on the management circumstances of individual estates. The Chair noted that some properties were monitoring annually probably in order to comply with GAEC / BPS requirements.

It was noted that growth rates for moorland vegetation in the DMG would be suppressed in 2018 given the late spring followed by a dry summer. DP asked members to note conditions when surveying and reminded them on the importance of photos. PB noted that sphagnum moss had died on Alltnahara on some of the blanket bogs plots and it was agreed that such observations need to be included in the comments box of the data recording sheets.

TC reminded the group that co-ordinates for sample plots were available for the whole DMG and NM suggested that the sampling area could be extended into areas such as Skinsdale Peatlands. MW also noted that there would be no footprints recorded in dry ground in 2018 surveys.

TC suggested that each member undertakes their own analysis so that they can see how that data flows through and proposed that a series of HIA analysis training sessions which SNH have provided funding for could be held with the first prior to the AGM in the autumn, ideally for a group of 5-10 members given funding had been received from SNH for this training. He mentioned that he had received some data from members who were keen for it to be analysed on their behalf and held centrally. HD supported estate ownership and understanding of the data and how it could inform management decisions at a local level as well as providing a data source for the group as a whole. TC also reminded members that the data could be used to either agree or challenge agencies in certain circumstances such as designated sites.

The discussion moved on to Public Interest and the RR highlighted the connection between managing the Public Interest and demonstrating that management to the wider public which can readily be achieved with HIA data.

4.4 Public Interest

TC provided a brief update on the issue raised by Lorne MacNichol at the previous meeting concerning the lack of consultation in the case of the crofter forestry scheme at Tressady and confirmed that FCS conservancy offices are not obliged to consult with DMGs in the case of woodland expansion schemes. He went on to explain that it the most reliable course for the DMG to become aware of proposed woodland schemes was for members to keep the DMG informed on all schemes that they become aware of. TC also confirmed that the area officers of FCS were now also on the contact list and will be kept informed of all future meetings.

4.5 Training Requirements

TC reminded members that this was now a fixed item on the agenda and asked the members whether any members had training requirements. There would be sense in arranging a course at a location within the DMG if 4 or more members required training in a particular matter. RR made members aware that there was a EFAW+F (First Aid) course due to be held in Ardgay Hall on 1 August 2018. PB confirmed that Alltnahara employees received a First Aid update on site every 3 years.

5.0 ADMG Health Check

TC referred to the email sent out to members previously providing the results and feedback on the ADMG Health Check undertaken by Victor Clements in June 2018. He reminded members that the DMG would be assessed by SNH in Spring 2019 and HD confirmed that this assessment would be undertaken by both her and DP.

TC reported to members that the feedback confirmed that generally the DMG was performing well but there was also a lot to be done before April 2019. The group needed to continue to demonstrate progress by moving some of the results marked as either red or yellow in the Health Check to either yellow or green, in particular the actions that had been undertaken but not articulated clearly within the minutes of meetings. TC made members aware that there was an expectation to invite community council interests to meetings, particularly the AGM. In a quick survey of those present, it was apparent that some members were already representing community council interests. RR cited the Community Day held in the Monadhliaths and HD suggested such an event did not need to be onerous, but it would be good if something could be seen to be done. Discussion was also held on preparing an article for local papers or interest magazines to provide a brief annual report on activities undertaken by the DMG. This could provide a range of positive messages that could readily be shared with the wider local community.

TC also reminded the group that there is now a community owned area at Garbh Allt, Helmsdale and the GACI group were now included in the DMG contact list.

TC went through some of the other points noted within the health check report including the groups finances, HIA analysis for the group as a whole and SQWV uptake by estates and members were reminded that the free inspection of larders was still available.

TC made the group aware that Victor Clements had pointed within the health check report that ADMG would take up with SNH that the DMG need better guidance on impact targets for HIA data collected in 2018. HD confirmed that discussion with ADMG was ongoing on this point and that the woodland monitoring criteria was still to be clarified given dwarf shrub heath and blanket bog had been given priority.

6.0 Venison Update

Discussion was held on the current larder standards and the pre-season letters circulated by game dealers, one of which stated that it was envisaged that carcasses will at some point soon only be collected from larders with chills under revised Food Standard Scotland regulations. Some members also raised concerns over suggestions from game dealers that carcasses with warbles would be rejected given warbles were common in deer culled after New Year.

MW made members aware that he had spoken to a top end restaurateur about warbles and they were not unduly concerned given the concerns are often due to appearance and not due to risk to public health. He also felt that it was important to maintain the market for reasonable rather than premium quality venison given late season stags probably fall in that category. RR reiterated the points made by MW and felt that FSS should be challenged by ADMG over some of the standards set in terms of venison standards.

TC also raised the possibility of collaboratively marketing venison or the DMG considering their own brand venison.

RR reminded members that two carcass handling films produced by ADMG with help from SNH had been launched at Scone and were available on YouTube

7.0 SNH Update

HD said the SNH focus was on the 2019 Assessment and the format would follow the assessments undertaken previously in 2014 and 2016 with particular focus on the 35 key criteria. She also mentioned that SNH would make all DMGs aware of what is expected in terms of the assessment through ADMG and that it would be unreasonable to expect all DMGs to be green across all 101 criteria within the assessment, but they will be expected to deliver on the priority criteria. The SNH feedback on both DMG meetings and the health check will continue to focus on these priority criteria so that DMGs are aware of what they need to focus on.

HD was questioned on those areas of Scotland that were not part of a DMG and she confirmed that those areas where collaborative deer management had not been adopted might be considered for a S.6 which provides a requirement for a written DMP where appropriate.

8.0 AOB

8.1 Stock Grazing at Crask

PB reported an ongoing issue with sheep on Vagastie and his concerns that Ben Klibreck SSSI might fail in terms of HIA although the deer were being managed effectively. DP confirmed that SNH has been in discussion with FCS regarding stock grazing at Crask and that the issue is being dealt with.

8.2 Rosal Forest Fence

BL raised the condition of the Rosal Forest fence given that there was a suggestion that holes had been cut allowing sheep to move in to the wood. Several members confirmed that the owner and agent for Rosal were both approachable in connection with any issues. TC also confirmed that he was looking to encourage greater forestry management input in to the DMG is possible and that cull returns would be requested from these properties.

8.3 Fire Plan

TC raised the matter of forming a fire plan for ESDMG to include equipment held by estates. It was suggested that assistance may be available through community windfarm funding for equipment. It was agreed that a questionnaire would be circulated to identify kit currently held by members of the DMG.

8.4 Deer Cull Information

It was identified that there are still some gaps in deer cull information for the group and SNH were asked whether they would be able to provide information. SNH advised that they are often chasing for the supply of information and that may not be possible from their records. TC said that he would keep requesting information to see whether some of the gaps can be filled both from woodland interests and from members.

8.5 Deer Counts

NM asked SNH whether there would be a further aerial count from SNH at the end of the DMP to see where numbers stand for the DMG. HD responded that it should be possible but that SNH were looking

to collaborate with groups wherever possible. Discussion turned to the cost of the count which was suggested to be in the region of £60k for a full count and how drones and other technology may come into play in the future.

9.0 Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed to hold this on Friday 2nd November 2018.

DRAFT