

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EASTER ROSS DEER
MANAGEMENT GROUP, HELD ON FRIDAY 22nd September 2017 AT 2.
PM AT MIDFEARN LODGE, ARDGAY.**

Present:

Mr Charlie Brooke	(Chairman)	Midfearn Estate
Mr Callum Beattie		Gledfield Estate
Mr Michael Brown		Midfearn Estate
Mr Christopher Franklin		Gruinards Estate
Mr Jim Gilmour		Gruinards Estate
Mr Alastair Harington	(Vice Chair)	Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Richard Harington		Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Dell Ross		Midfearn Estate
Mr Kim Sawyer		Dounie Estate
Mr Jamie Sawyer		Dounie Estate

In attendance:

Mr Sinclair Coghill (Scottish Natural Heritage)
Mr Derek Macaskill (Forestry Commission)
Mr Gordon Robertson (Secretary and Treasurer)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Neil Cameron (Gledfield), David Campbell, Helen and Robert Franklin (Gruinards Estate), and Alex Hunter (Dounie Estate).

2. Chairman's introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Meeting.

3. Minutes of Meeting held on 10.03.2017

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 10th March 2017, previously circulated, were approved.

4. Action points from the previous Minutes.

Any action points that had not been addressed between meetings were to be covered later in this meeting.

5. Deer Management Plan and Scottish Natural Heritage.

Sinclair Coghill (SC) reminded everyone that SNH had been asked to assess the effectiveness of all DMG's in 2014. A further review was completed by SNH in 2016 with a report submitted to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

SC explained the scoring method attributed to each DMG resulting in a green/red/amber marking for the various elements. Public benefit was a major factor in the marking and the ERDMG featured a lot of amber.

Christopher Franklin (CF) asked if the group could see the criteria used for appraisal. SC reported that the emphasis had been on land management, not deer management.

Michael Brown (MB) stated that the ER DMG was a group embracing the changes required and was working to improve, but that the graph indicated that the group was falling short. As a Group, we have addressed most of the elements within our DMP, and we are keen to learn more about the Public Interest criteria requirements. All present stressed the Group's continuing desire to co-operate and requested guidance from SC as to the areas that required improvement.

SC undertook to write to the Members setting out the successes and failures so far, with a clear indication of targets to be achieved. **ACTION SC**

These would focus on the stated Aims and Objectives of Group Deer Plan and the Action Points set out therein. These cover and include

- Areas and boundaries
- Membership
- Meetings
- Code of Practice on deer management
- Principles of Collaboration
- Best Practice
- Deer Counts and recording
- Habitat monitoring
- Competence and training
- Delivery of Public Interest outcomes
- Impact of deer on the wider countryside
- Management of Carbon sensitive sites
- Landscape and historic landscape protection
- Deer welfare

- Collaborative working

SG stressed that the ERDMG will be assessed in a year's time.

SNH grants of up to £2,000 were available to employ an ecologist to interpret habitat assessments.

This operation will be discussed with David Campbell (DC) Action GR
Guidance and clarity were clearly needed. JG reported that posts placed by Nikki Dayton of Quadrat on the Gruinards Estate had been rubbed away by deer. MB questioned the siting of sample plots and urged that they are placed on impacted areas.

KS pointed out that a number of Crofters on the Dounie Estate were exceeding their permitted stocking rates for cattle. Cattle were grazing land that had historically been grazed by deer. The positioning of some survey points lay within areas dominated by cattle. SG stressed that the original sites for assessment should be retained, no matter.

SC recommended that individual sites should be surveyed every 2-3 years. The next assessment to be recorded will be in 2018.

SC offered the following advice, based on past research

- Try to maximise sporting stags for the known population we have.
- Research shows that if hind numbers are reduced, the resultant hinds are more likely to produce stag calves. Hinds at a lower density level become better mothers and generally produce more stag calves.
- Lower density stags will also survive hard weather as less competition will exist for food.

6. Deer Cull Targets

GAR will circulate cull returns, and comparisons to targets will be assessed at the next meeting of the Group. KS reported that the hinds on Dounie were not as heavy as in previous years.

SC circulated his paper on Deer population data and proposed culls for 2017/2018. He confirmed that he started with the population model included within the DMP.

It was clear to him that there were more hinds on the ground than meets the requirements of the Group and thus there was a detrimental effect on the stags. JS confirmed that at Dounie most calves shot were female (8% only stag calves)

SC's tables were based on a pro rata basis of the previous year's cull.

Generally everyone present felt the targets were reasonable.

JG felt that Gruinards might exceed their hind targets but could fall short on stags.

CB indicated that Mid Fearn was on track. RH and AH both reported that the stag cull on Strathrusdale was on target. Hinds would be lower as the estate was moving

towards deer farming. Dounie and Gledfield were on target and GR would enquire of Jonathan Mason regarding Glencalvie's returns. On-going.

The subject returned to Habitat Assessment and Training

- SC confirmed that photographic records linked to sites identified by GPS provided excellent data.
- Best to use solid plastic stakes
- Best to assess annually in May
- Best Practice Guidelines are on the SNH Website
- GR will prompt members in early May.
- Everyone present was keen to attend a methodology training day. This would be a one day course. GAR will find out more and revert. **Action GR**
- SC reminded all of the funds that were available under the Peatland Restoration Fund. He also stressed that funds were available within SRDP. Further grant assistance was available to prepare a Moorland Management Plan.

7. Membership of Easter Ross Deer Management Group

DM was pleased to confirm that the Forestry Commission will join the ERDMG. GR will forward the existing Plan to DM and discuss with DC as to the estimated cost of including the new data into the document. **Action GR**

DM confirmed that FC would be prepared to make a retrospective payment towards the plan and in future pay ongoing costs based on a per head shot basis.

8. Finance

The ongoing budget short fall was discussed. GR would bring an updated and detailed breakdown to the next meeting, in order that a clear and agreed format for moving forward can be decided upon.

This document will include the Forestry Commission, and an annual contribution from Glencalvie based on stags shot. **Action GR**

9. AOCB

KS warned that venison returns would be lower this year following the letter received by all from Ardgay Game. Penalties for poor shots and stomach shots will mean a larger percentage of venison being rejected.

ACTIONS

1. Discuss merits of applying for SNH grant with DC to evaluate habitat work. ACTION GR
2. Provide guidance from SNH on actions required by ERDMG in order to improve performance rating. ACTION SC
3. Find out and circulate details of Habitat Assessment training day in May 2018 ACTION GR
4. DM confirmed FC membership. Existing ERDMP to be sent to him and GR to liaise with DC over inclusion in revised document. ACTION GR
5. GR will produce a detailed Financial Breakdown showing new members and full costs for the ERDMG going forward. ACTION GR