

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EASTER ROSS DEER
MANAGEMENT GROUP, HELD ON FRIDAY 1st DECEMBER 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 Alastair Harington	(Vice Chair)	Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Richard Harington		Strathrusdale Estate
Mr David MacDonald		Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Dell Ross		Midfearn Estate
Mr Kim Sawyer		Dounie Estate

In attendance:

Mr Sinclair Coghill (Scottish Natural Heritage)
Mr Paddy Meiklejohn (Blervie, Forres)
Mr Gordon Robertson (Secretary and Treasurer)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Callum Beattie (Gledfield Estate), Michael Brown (Midfearn), Neil Cameron (Gledfield), David Campbell, Helen, Chris and Robert Franklin (Gruinards Estate), Jim Gilmour (Gruinards Estate), Alex Hunter (Dounie Estate), Derek Macaskill (Forestry Commission)

2. Chairman's introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Meeting and in particular Paddy Meiklejohn who was to give advice to the Group on the Management of the Red Deer Population.

3. Minutes of Meeting held on 22.09.2017

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 22nd September 2017, previously circulated, were approved.

4. Action points from the previous Minutes.

5. Highland Red Deer Stocking Density. I.P.F Meiklejohn

A paper written in 1992 by Paddy Meiklejohn (PM) had been circulated to members prior to the meeting. In introducing his presentation, PM emphasised how passionately he felt on the subject and that he maintains a clear view on the correct methods for the management of deer populations.

Deer management is the control of the deer population, in a given area, in order that it achieves its maximum potential.

This is achieved by

1. Receiving Income from shooting and venison
2. Carrying out the Annual Cull to achieve the correct balance.
3. Careful analysis of the cull itself.

PM drew the Group's attention to the data illustrated within his paper drawn from the study of the Red Deer population in the Kilmory area of Rhum.

Many points were articulated.

1. Either sex of deer will naturally increase when not overstocked.
2. During times of extreme weather conditions, it was more often the case that the older more mature stags, exhausted from the rut, were the ones that did not make it through the winter.
3. If the Objective is to have mature stags, stocking density is critical.

PM addressed the issue of the Deer population within the ERDMG. At the last count this noted 1,300 hinds and 500 stags (rounded) with a proposed cull of 85 stags and 230 hinds.

With a ratio of stags to hinds of 1 to 2.45, he described the groups position as 'pretty grim'.

If the Group stuck to its current plan to shoot 85 stags, this represented a cull of 6-7%. **The correct cull should be 17%**

The only way forward is to have a much heavier cull of the hind population. By getting the 'feet off the ground', this not only improves the chances of the more mature stags getting through the winter, it also reduces grazing pressure enabling positive change to happen swiftly.

3

The ERDMG needs to show that it is beyond reproach and demonstrate that its deer management is based upon a sound scientific approach.

PM drew the group's attention to his Spread Sheet, which illustrated various levels of incremental cull options for Stags and Hinds over a number of years. PM focused on Column F, which illustrated a 25% Hind cull. This was the heaviest recommended cull from SNH.

The figures spoke for themselves. By carrying out this level of a hind cull, the hind numbers naturally dropped but the stag percentage rose steadily. The aim must be to carry out a 25% reduction in hind numbers for the next 5 years and this will reduce the overall hind population by 35%.

With careful monitoring and sound management, the increment in the Stag population will increase by 17% of hind numbers per annum.

PM commented that SNH's current approach was habitat led. His approach was population led, but that both sides agreed that the end result was similar.

In supporting PM, RH stressed that on a yearly basis the ERDMG should stress record the increase in Stag numbers, not the loss in numbers of the hinds.

PM also reassured the Group that on the rare occasion of an extreme winter, resulting in fatalities, that each estate needed to sensitively manage their stocks to return to the agreed status quo.

The Hind Cull

PM stressed that, in reality, there was effectively only a 10 week period for the hind cull to be tackled. Numbers of hinds shot were more important than the individual selection of hinds. Every additional hind shot enables an extra stag to survive. It is vital to cover all the ground and be absolutely honest with recording. Whilst PM did not condemn feeding, he felt this was generally an 'excuse for keeping too many deer'.

PM urged everyone to keep extensive Larder records, recording age, weight, and condition. In appraising the deer stock, do not become obsessed with 'Heads'. It is more important to look at the body and necks in conjunction with heads.

CB thanked PM for his thought provoking presentation, based on many years of practical experience coupled with scientific data.

SC congratulated PM on his clear, articulate, and informed presentation, and felt that the joint objectives of the ERDMG and SNH would be well served by following the advice given. This was a leap of faith, that required courage, and all present agreed that the Group should adopt this positive change to future management.

Discussion points

1. The Group should aim to carry out a helicopter count every 3 years
2. The Group should work collaboratively to carry out a foot count every year, choosing times when there was 'snow on the tops' and all estate keepers knew where their deer were concentrating.
3. It was accepted that certain areas of Woodland presented challenges to the count, particularly on the Gledfield Estate.
4. SC stressed that Habitat Assessment, was not compulsory. This was only offered as good advice from SNH. The industry is being charged with overgrazing the landscape. Habitat assessment is a means of demonstrating the real picture.
5. All agreed that it would be 'unwise' not to carry out the assessments. SC pointed out that there were 60 selected sites throughout the whole Group area. This represented about a week's work per year for all the work needed, so divided between estates the burden was small.
6. KS agreed and stated that assessments would be beneficial at Dounie, as they had the additional problem of overgrazing by Crofters, and this was having a negative impact of the Deer population and the environment generally.
7. SC advised that SNH had access to radios which could be loaned to the Group when the foot count took place.
8. All agreed to focus on delivering the agreed hind cull targets. Progress will be assessed in February 2018. In the meantime GR will contact members on a monthly basis to receive regular updates. This information will be circulated.
9. All agreed to focus on delivering a training day for Habitat Monitoring.

Action GR

6. Deer Management Plan and Scottish Natural Heritage.

SC stated his support for the Group's commitment to undertake the proper management of the Red Deer herd. A huge corner had been turned following at least 10 years of gestation.

The way forward had been very well articulated by PM in his presentation. All very positive.

DC had circulated a copy of the **ERDMG Working Plan and Action Points**, with various sections highlighted in red amber and green. These tied in with SNH's assessment of the effectiveness and delivery of the agreed plan.

5

GR went through this document with all present and will revert to DC with updates. SC acknowledged where positive changes and progress had been made, and these will be noted by SNH. Training commitments were being addressed.

Grant Funds continued to be available for peatland restoration. There may be some merit for a Group application. This would remain under consideration.

A review of existing and potential woodland habitats was ongoing. AH had already been on the FCS website to assess existing data. SC advised that there could be FC funding to carry out further survey work. GR will investigate.

Action GR

7. Habitat Assessment Grant Opportunity of £1,800 from SNH

GR had registered the ERDMG's interest in taking up the grant offer from SNH. This grant has to be claimed by the end of March 2018.

As soon as details are received back from SNH, GR will circulate members and contact Quadrat Environmental Services (Nikki Dayton) to provide members with options and dates.

Action GR

8. Deer Cull Targets

The previously circulated table of Stag and Hind Culls was discussed. It was acknowledged that this was continually changing, but an updated version will be circulated by GR following the meeting.

Action GR

9. Sporting Rates

GR had circulated a report by email following the latest ADMG Regional Meeting in Inverness.

If in any doubt, Assessments should be appealed. There was still the requirement to pay this year's assessment even if an appeal is in train.

The Assessor's department is currently swamped.

All agreed that this current thrust from the Government was more about a Land Tax rather than an assessment of Sporting interest. No emphasis had been put on the intensity of sporting activity by the Assessor.

10.Membership of Easter Ross Deer Management Group

All present were delighted that the Forestry Commission and Forest Enterprise were part of the Group. GR had again contacted Fountain Forestry but no further progress was noted.

11.Finance

The schedule, (previously circulated), which set out the proposed costs for the administration of the Group in 2018 were approved, along with the ratios for apportioning the amounts due for each land holding. GR will send out individual invoices. **Action GR**

GR advised that the ASDG are still to send out a notice of their Membership Fee which will also be based on the number of Stags and Hinds shot per Estate. When this is received GR will contact everyone to inform them of what is due.

12.AOCB

No items were raised.

13.Dates of future Meetings.

It was proposed that the next main meeting of the Group would take place on **Friday April 13th 2018.**

There would be a short meeting to evaluate the overall Deer Cull on **Friday 23rd February 2018.**

The Meeting closed at 3.50 pm.

ACTIONS

1. On receipt of details from SNH, GR to contact Quadrat (Nikki Dayton) to enable Habitat Training using £1,800 grant available from SNH. Circulate options to all **Action GR**
2. Circulate updated schedule of stag and hind culls. **Action GR**
3. Circulate monthly updates of Hind Cull **Action GR**
4. Investigate possible FC support for reviewing potential and existing woodland habitat sites within ERDMG area. Report back. **Action GR**
5. Send out invoices to individual Estates to cover the cost of Administration of the ERDMG during 2018. **Action GR**