

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EASTER ROSS DEER
MANAGEMENT GROUP, HELD ON FRIDAY 6th APRIL 2018 AT 2.00 PM
AT MIDFEARN LODGE, ARDGAY.**

Present:

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

In attendance:

Mr David Campbell (Land Consultancy Services)
Mr Sinclair Coghill (Scottish Natural Heritage)
Mr Paddy Meiklejohn (Blervie, Forres)
Mr Gordon Robertson (Secretary and Treasurer)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Michael Brown (Mid Fearn Estate), Neil Cameron (Gledfield), Derick Macaskill (Forestry Commission), and Mr David MacDonald (Strathrusdale Estate)

2. Chairman's introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Meeting.

3. Minutes of Meeting held on 01.12.2017

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 1st December 2017, previously circulated, were approved.

4. Action points from the previous Minutes.

All the action points noted in the Minutes had been undertaken except for the one relating to FC support for reviewing potential and existing woodland habitats within the ERDMG area. **Action GR and DM**

5. Deer Management Plan.

DC referred to his previously circulated 'colour coded' document which indicated in green, items that were satisfactory, in amber items moving towards green and items in red that required immediate improvement.

SC's email of the 21st December had helpfully highlighted similar priorities.

DC will update on Group priorities and advise

Action DC

- All present confirmed that every Estate Member's staff had qualifications DM1 and DM2.
- A Group Training Policy document is required.
- Venison marketing aspirations are on hold as the group continued to support Ardgay Game. Opportunities to 'add value' and to promote venison from the ERDMG area still existed.
- Advice on potential and existing native and commercial woodland management and extension. SC advised that the Dingwall office of FC was the place to go. **Action GR**
- Evaluate woodland as a place of shelter, not just tree production.
- Potential funding from FC towards writing a Forest Plan.
- Any plans by individual estates for major tree planting proposals should be discussed with the ERDMG to mitigate impacts on neighbours.
- Peatland Restoration. The large SNH Fund for peatland restoration closes at the end of May. This covers work for blocking drains, slowing down run offs, carbon sequestration. SC suggested that the Group should commission a Feasibility Study. GR will approach Angus Davidson **Action GR**
- Staff training and Continuing Professional Development improving from a red assessment. Positive direction of travel.
- Final area requiring improvement. GR to investigated potential for school visits using Highland Council Ranger Service and School staff. Potential for a joint estate visit with the Kyle of Sutherland Fisheries Trust. Consult with Dr Keith Williams. **Action GR**

6. Offer of free DMP Assessment by ADMG.

SC reported that, having listened to DC, and witnessed the progress made by the Group, he felt that the Group did not need to be assessed. However, it was felt by all that no harm could come from having an independent assessment carried out by ADMG. This action also demonstrates to a wider audience that the Group is undertaking its duties in a positive manner. GR will register ERDMG's interest with ADMG.

Action GR

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

GR reported that the Group had been awarded the £1,800 grant from SNH. This had been claimed and will be in the ERDMG Bank Account within the next few days. Nikki Dayton (ND) of Quadrat Scotland is liaising with GR and the Group to deliver a programme that delivers maximum benefit. GR will ask for a cost for ND to revisit the existing sites, with estate staff, to reassess, improve and train. **Action GR**

8. Deer numbers and the hind cull

PM commented that the intended whole population level aimed for in the DMP was noted at 1143. This season's total cull represented 23.24% of the whole population, following a 'horrific' winter. The effects of the severe nature of the weather are still to be revealed.

AH commented that the hard winter worked in the Group's favour with its population reduction target, but accepted PM's comment that the Stags will fare worse than Hinds with regard to survival when weak.

JG agreed, noting that nature had a way of taking out the weakest animals.

PM stressed that it was impossible to guess now what the Group's Spring numbers will be. He congratulated the Group for increasing the cull numbers.

PM suggested that SNH might help fund a Spring Count as the next planned helicopter count was programmed for 2020. It was proposed to carry out a count in May. SC will cost another helicopter account (estimated in the region of £5,000) and he would confirm whether SNH would meet half of this cost. **Action SC**

PM urged the Group not to worry too much at this stage about the numbers. The Group's current population is only about 20% too high and the excess numbers can be taken out by shooting hinds, not stags. He backed up SC's supportive comments confirming that the Group were on the right track.

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There was a general discussion on whether the reduction of deer numbers would improve the chances of grouse numbers increasing. This was complicated in some areas by crofters overgrazing their cattle and sheep to the detriment of the upland habitats

Individual Estates will carry out foot counts shortly and report these to GR.

So far the data is as follows.

Strathrusdale reported a count of	57 stags in 2018 compared to 110 in 2016
Midfean reported a count of	68 stags in 2018 compared to 138 in 2016.
Dounie reported a count of	51 stags in 2018 compared to 48 in 2016

Gledfield had not completed their count but CB indicated a figure of 71 stags, none of which had dropped their antlers.

SC commented that these early figures confirm PM's advice to concentrate on reducing hinds in the autumn.

9. Scottish Natural Heritage

SC stated that the ERDMG had come on 'in leaps and bounds' He noted the intention to update the Plan and then republish it on the ADMG Website. He congratulated the Group on the progress made and felt that when the SNH review takes place in 2019, the ERDMG will have progressed significantly in line with priorities highlighted in the Government Review.

10. Muir Burn

AH had raised the issue of whether the Group as a whole or individual owners should apply for extensions the Muir Burning season, due to the very poor weather throughout the winter.

It was agreed that it was a matter for each individual Estate to decide upon.

It was agreed that GR would email all members of the Group, attaching Guidelines and Application Forms produced by SNH. **Action GR**

11. Sporting Rates

Members will take advantage of the Small Business Rates Relief where this applies. A clear update from ADMG has been provided in the most recent edition of SCOPE.

12.Membership of Easter Ross Deer Management Group

Following the inclusion of the Forestry Commission, there have been no more members.

13.Finance

GR reported that Glencalvie had not paid their agreed share of the annual costs. Jonathan Mason had now retired from Bell Ingram and GR will pursue this matter with the new management team. GR will circulate an update, but confirmed that the fee for the Website hosting had been paid to ADMG and that the £1,800 grant from SNH for Habitat training and assessment had been received.

14.AOCB

No items were raised.

15.Date of next Meeting.

It was proposed that the next main meeting of the Group would take place to coincide with the Kyle of Sutherland Fisheries Trust meeting in June. GR will contact Keith Williams and circulate date.

The Meeting closed at 3.50 pm.

ACTIONS

1. Investigate possible FC support for reviewing potential and existing woodland habitat sites within ERDMG area. GR will also contact FC Office in Dingwall in tandem with discussions with DM **ACTION GR/DM**
2. Update colour coding assessments of DMP and advise group of areas requiring immediate attention. **ACTION DC**
3. Ask Angus Davidson to conduct a peatland restoration feasibility study which will be 100% SNG grant funded. **Action GR**
4. Potential Estate visits. Investigate co-operation with Highland Ranger Service, Schools and KSDSFT **Action GR**
5. Contact Linzi Seivwright at ADMG to register ERDMG's interest in an Independent Assessment on the Group's progress with the DNP implementation. **Action GR**
6. Contact Nikki Dayton at Quadrat Scotland to progress Habitat Assessment, Training and recording programmes. **Action GR**
7. SC to cost a May helicopter count and confirm whether SNG would be prepared to offer a 50% grant for this work. **Action SC**
8. Circulate Muir Burning Code and details of procedure required to apply for extensions to the season. **Action GR**
9. Contact Keith Williams to ascertain dates for KSFT meetings, and circulate proposed date for next ERDMG meeting. **Action GR**