

West Lochaber Deer Management Group

WEST LOCHABER DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
Spring Meeting
Thursday 6th. June 2024
10.00am– 12.30pm

Minute

Attendees:

Richard Cooke (Chairman)
 Bruce Taylor – (DMG Secretary & Treasurer)
 Lorna Stewart- (Minutes Secretary) Fassfern
 Andrew MacMaster – NatureScot Wildlife officer
 Henry Dobson – WTS Loch Arkaig
 Alex MacDonald - Achnacarry Sporting
 John Morrison – Achnacarry South
 Simon Laird – Achnacarry Sporting
 Hazel Boyd – Bidwells (agent Achnacarry)
 Astie Cameron – Achnacarry Estate
 John Jackson– F&LS, Glen Loy and Gairloch forests
 Michael Rhoden - Fassfern/Achdaliu
 Alistair Gibson – (ADMG rep), Glenfinnan
 Craig Higgins – Glenfinnan
 Robert Spence - Scamadale
 Raymond Fraser – Meoble
 Pete MacLaren – Ranachan
 Paolo Berardelli - Glen Mamie
 Sandy Walker – Retired deer stalker
 Coll McDonald – Ranachan
 James de Ferranti, Meoble (on line)
 James Colston – Arisaig
 Niall Rowantree - Ardnish

Apologies:

Ian Collier – Scottish Forestry
 Alan Currie – Fassfern/Achdaliu
 Graham Nairn – Annat/Achanellan/Glen Fada
 Ian Leith – Glenfinnan
 Jane Mitchell – Glenfinnan
 Harry Nicholson - Fassfern/Achdaliu
 Peter Stewart-Sandeman – Ardnish
 Sandra de Ferranti - Meoble
 Euan MacKelvie – Glenfinnan
 Victor Clements – DMP Consultant

Non- attendance:

John MacDonald – West Highland Hunting -Scamadale

No.	Summary	Action
1	<p>Apologies and Introductions As recorded above.</p> <p>Richard Cooke, interim Chair provided by ADMG, introduced meeting. ADMG provides interim support to local DMG's to allow them to find a suitable Chair, hopefully within the next year.</p>	

2 Members Reports.

- i) 2023/24 Hind Culls**
- ii) Condition and mortality.**

Estate	Hinds			Calves	Stags (forestry)	Comments
	No.	Av Wt(kg)	Av Age			
Glenfinnan	70	44.5	7	26		quite light and worse towards end of season
Forest Enterprise	12			8		condition was good and no sign of mortality
WTS Loch Arkaig	45					end sept to march inc calves
Glen Loy Forest	12			8		Achnacarry Sporting Lease
Ranachan	20			8		condition – older ones poor and weights weren't as high as normal. Didn't see any mortality
Meoble	50			20		condition reasonable
Achdalieu	100			51		hinds poor at the start of the season
Fassfern Forest	22			10		
Achnacarry South Hill	150			52		condition quite good until last few weeks of the season
Glen Loy (Nairn)	46			32		
Glen Mamie	40					including calves
Ardnish	15			4		conditions fair and poor towards the end.
Scamadale	14			5		+1 sika doe
Arisaig	60			21		

3 Aerial count report by Naturescot, Deer Management Plan and Population models

Count conducted 6th & 7th March 2024 and conditions were good. One corrie in Meoble tricky to access due to weather. Numbers and densities not as expected - the increase in deer culls doesn't correlate to densities seen. Possible site-specific reasons as to why changes aren't as expected. Noted that the weather was very different between this count and the last count. Sika deer not counted but still doesn't pinpoint what the significant change was but, as ever with counts, a snapshot on one day. there was a discussion about the credibility of the Count in view of the surprising results and AM said that NS would consider a further aerial count in a couple of years. In the meantime, an accurate coordinated Group foot count will be needed.

Need to consider many variables including weather, and deer crossing bodies of water – the boundaries of the group are not the population boundaries. Sex ratio is less than 2:1 but more than 1:1. NatureScot advocates a hind reduction and members within the group have already projected significant increases in culls so likely to meet requirements of NatureScot. The general objective of group is to reduce numbers to 10 and, in the last 6 years, overall numbers have reduced from 14 to 11 deer/km²: so a downward trend. Concerns expressed that the figure of 10 deer/Km² could be further reduced as a Scottish Government target and that, at around 8 deer/Km², deer stalking becomes an uneconomic activity. The focus of the reduction should be on the hinds to bring down the population and density and the sex ratio could be reduced while still providing the number of sporting stags required by Group members.

	<p>Henry Dobson has been doing thermal imagine drone counts every year in WTS forest area. Numbers go up and down but doing the HIA every year really helps to understand what is happening on the ground. Finds map interesting but notes that WTS did their drone count at a similar time and had 40 deer in wood that were missed from the NatureScot count being within woodland. The woodland is enclosed so not really an issue but wonders if there are other areas of woodlands on the map where deer have been missed. Andrew McMaster to look at summary as fenced area is excluded. Need to make sure that fenced off areas are included or excluded consistently across the area.</p> <p>WLDMG has been identified as a priority for NatureScot due to the unfavourable condition of the designated sites of Glen Beasdale SSSI, Loch Arkaig Pinewood SSSI and general concerns regarding collaboration within the group. AM suggested application under Section 6a of the Deer (Scotland) Act to enable the group to provide a collaborative Deer Management Plan. There is an opportunity for the group to apply for the Nature Restoration Fund to assist with the delivery of the plan which could also include HIA monitoring. This would include HIA surveys to identify the environmental objectives and help direct cull targets which would continue to be set internally by the group. Habitat improvement is the key benchmark. Must also consider other factors such as livestock and invasive species. Noted WLDMG has good historical data but this data but could be refreshed as part of the new plan going forward. It is essential HIA data is used to inform land management. Hazel asked whether section 6.a guarantees NRF Funding or does it just leave you with an obligation to produce a plan but not necessarily with the funding. James Colston questioned what are the criteria and rules that applied to judge if plan is acceptable. Andrew McMaster to confirm.</p> <p>AM emphasised at this time NatureScot is requesting the DMG voluntary requests to be entered into a Section 6A agreement and this lowest level of intervention by NS being, in effect, an offer of support. The next step up, not currently under consideration, is a Section 7 voluntarily control agreement but with stricter prescription by NS; then, at last resort level, there is the Section 8 Control Order which allows NatureScot to come in and do the job themselves and recover costs. It was emphasised that NS is not considering resorting to these intervention mechanisms as things currently stand. Only if the target density and improving habitat objectives are not achieved over the coming years might these come into play. As the count shows the population is coming down and the direction of travel is in the right direction. James Colston and Alistair Gibson requested more detail on the benchmarks that will be used by NS and on what basis this could be escalated to s7.</p> <p>James Ferranti expressed reservations about s.6a but noted the general support from all the attendees.</p> <p>Andrew McMaster to produce written understanding of new legislation and draft to be sent to DMG Chair for review in next couple of weeks before being issued to wider group. Further WLDMG will be required to discuss the implications of a s.6 application and an extraordinary meeting to be considered.</p>	<p>AP1 -AMcM</p> <p>AP2- AMcM</p> <p>AP3-AMcM</p> <p>AP4-AMcM</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>ADMG report and update</p> <p>Richard Cooke updated on ADMG report. There have been some changes on political front new Minister Jim Fairlie replaces Lorna Slater. Removal of Green Party and effect on deer policy remains to be seen, the SG consultation paper "Managing Deer for Climate and Nature" which closed on 31st March features a lot of Green policy. Wait and see if new Minister continues with same policy. ADMG argued strongly against the proposal for Deer Management Nature</p>	

Restoration Orders as reported by Tom Turnbull at the previous meeting. It remains to be seen whether this poorly thought out idea will be carried forward into the Natural Environment Bill to be presented later in the year.

Scottish Venison in process of making itself more robust and increasing funding. Agreement in place with ADMG to fund from ADMG membership fee replacing the former levy and raising more money alongside a new mechanism for contributions from the venison processors. The substantial increase in income, more than double, will enable Scottish Venison to raise its level of promotional work which will be necessary in view of the increased culls expected both in Scotland and south of the border. The aspiration is both to grow the market and improve returns to producers who currently cull deer at a loss.

Work is also under way to bring Scottish Venison and Scottish Quality Wild Venison which runs the QA scheme together to improve organisational efficiency.

Henry on **Common Ground Forum** – 2 years in place and concept to get reps from deer management in all sectors to break down barriers and polarization on deer management and to work together. Concept isn't about solutions but fosters dialogue and encourages trust and communication. Shows opportunities for local communities and employment and there are more common grounds than not. Encouraging progress has been made.

Richard Cooke – under the auspices of the Common Ground Forum Scottish Venison has made a joint proposal with ADMG and Scottish Environment Link to Government for a venison subsidy which has been well received by Government. However, funds are not available at present to introduce a national scheme as referred to by Mhairi McAllan among future climate measures but there are to be three pilot schemes starting in 2024 to explore possible support mechanisms, one in the Cairngorms (red deer), one in Inverness-shire (sika) and one in the Central Belt (roe).

ADMG at Scone all welcome to attend.

5 Achnacarry, Arkaig WTS and Glen Beasdale woodland reports

Hazel – Achnacarry have 15-20 year plan to restore and create new woodland approx. 3,000ha over that time. Contract in place with SF for 250ha of restoration works in the pinewood due to start this year with continuation of various different projects over next few years. Current focus is on the South Forest and must meet SF grant criteria inc deer management. First 5 years is generally in south with the old forest (pinewood) Inver Mallie SSSI. Cull target this year exceeded and with new enclosures going in this year's cull target doubled to comply with SF & NS (250 hinds and 100 stags this coming season)

Henry – WT big cull last year and on target however target was increased due to large break in of c. 40 deer due to burst water gate during heavy rain. Replacing 5.5km of fence this summer so fence will be more robust. WT meet regularly with Achnacarry and FLS and have identified similar vision so working together.

Bruce – Glen Beasdale, Atlantic oakwood SSSI and SAC in unfavourable condition partly due to deer impacts, rhododendron and fire. Network Rail (NWR) looking to fence an area of woodland

	<p>chosen by Arisaig and Glen Mamie Estates to regenerate native woodlands. Hoping to get c. 10,000m of fencing erected. SF are supportive and feasibility study to identify best way to protect and expand woodland area ongoing.</p> <p>Fire is big risk to this area. NS had a working group with NWR and important that fires are documented and escalated. NS to get meeting with NWR and other key stakeholders to discuss fires and frequency seems to be increasing.</p>	
<p>6</p>	<p>AOCB & correspondence</p> <p>Muirshearlich Stock Club noted impact of deer browsing on spring grass available for sheep at Glen Fada and also that the fence is porous.</p>	
<p>7</p>	<p>Date of next meeting</p> <p>Date of next meeting - AGM Friday 6th December 2024</p>	