

Draft Note of Meeting (29 January 2019)

Date: Friday 18 January 2019
Time: 6:00 – 8:15 pm
Location: Cally Hall, Bridge of Cally
Subject: 2018 SNH Caenlochan Survey Project: Update & Report
Present: Drew McFarlane-Slack (Independent Chair of Monadhliath DMG)
Mike Cottam (SDNA DMG)
Colin McLean (SDNA DMG)
Angus McNicol & Will Reid (Invercauld)
Florian Kuhnle & Bill Mearns (Tulchan)
Deirdre Stewart (EGDMG1)
Bruce Cooper (Glenprosen)
Rob Mearns (Balintore & Lednathie)
Brian Smith (Airlie West)
Hugh Niven & Thom Wells (Glen Clova)
Richard Gledson & Gary Coutts (Balmoral)
Jamie Gammell & James Davidson (Forter/Alrick)
Kevin Peters (FES Glendoll)
Andrew Gammell & Graham Slater (Auchavan)
Jason Williamson (Glencally)
John Gibb & Nick Gibb (Glenisla House)
Thomas Rust & Mark Mitchell (Bell Ingram, for Scottish Water)
Douglas Campbell (SCL)
Denise Reed (Chair), Neale Taylor & Iain Hope (SNH)
Apologies: None

1 Introduction & Purpose

The main purpose of this meeting, the third in a series of 3, was to explore and discuss a proposed way forward with a strategic planning process; the proposed way forward had been outlined in a presentation by Dougie Campbell (SCL) at the previous meeting (on 14 December) and subsequently 'fleshed out' in a Briefing Note (dated 20 December 2019) on a Strategic Planning Process. The Note was sent from SNH (Iain Hope) to DMG secretaries (Deirdre Stewart & Mike Cottam) on 20 December; for forwarding to DMG members.

The meeting also provided an opportunity to review progress in achieving the 2018/2019 hind cull and to discuss figures from a recent (January 2019) deer count by estate staff.

2 Note of Meeting on 14 December 2018

A draft note of the meeting on 14 December had been circulated. There being no substantive comments on the note of the meeting, the note was taken to be approved. The actions arising from the meeting on 14 December had been either discharged or carried forward.

There was discussion about action 5, which related to SNH carrying out a fixed-wing 'deer spotting' reconnaissance flight. It was explained that, although SNH had an aircraft on 'stand-by' (an aircraft belonging to Caledonian Air Surveys Ltd.), no flight had been carried out by SNH; partly because the aircraft had been grounded due to a technical fault¹ and partly because it was evident (from estate staff reports on collaborative cull activity) that there had not been a pressing need to identify 'sanctuaries' (i.e. where hind cull effort was below desired levels). It was noted that the option to use a fixed-wing aircraft, to identify hind 'sanctuaries', remains open to SNH.

Several people mentioned that they thought SNH should carry out another deer count by helicopter at the earliest opportunity. It was pointed out that SNH had spent considerable sums

¹ The aircraft has since been repaired and is airworthy again.

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of public money counting deer at Caenlochan (including the deer count by helicopter in January 2018 and the deer dung count also in 2018) and that SNH currently has no plans for deer counts at Caenlochan.

Action 1: Action 5 from 14 November was carried forward. If necessary, Iain Hope (SNH) to carry out a fixed-wing 'deer-spotting' flight - if there's a perceived need to identify any 'sanctuaries' caused by a marked absence of hind cull activity.

3 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising; other than those to be addressed under the agenda.

4 Proposal for an Improved Deer Management Planning Process

Dougie Campbell (SCL) gave a brief presentation, which reiterated a summary of the background to the project, an overview of the key conclusions and an overview of the recommended strategic planning process (that had been described in the SCL Briefing Note circulated by SNH on 20 December 2018).

Dougie described 10 key recommendations, arising from SCL's strategic review of deer management at Caenlochan and encapsulated within the December Briefing Note, all of which will be incorporated within SCL's final report (due by the end of April 2019). Dougie stressed that the 10 key recommendations should be considered as interdependent, and should not be subject to any process of 'pick & mix'.

After Dougie's presentation, Denise Reed (SNH & Chair) explained that, from the SNH perspective, the previous deer management plans had been insufficient to deliver a tangible improvement in the condition of the designated habitats and that SNH was therefore endorsing the approach proposed by SCL to get the designated sites into 'assured management' – in a realistic but relatively quick timescale.

A question and answer session followed. The questions and answers are presented at Annex 1 below.

A group of DMG members² had met on 3 January 2019 and, at that meeting, had instructed Colin McClean to develop a management planning proposal as an alternative to the process described in the Briefing Note, that had been prepared in December by Strath Caulaidh (on behalf of SNH) and circulated for consideration by landowners. Deirdre Stewart had forwarded a copy of the DMG alternative proposal to SNH on 15 January.

Colin gave a presentation summarising the DMG alternative proposal. Colin indicated that the alternative proposal was offered in a spirit of constructiveness and emphasised that:

- DMG members agreed with some of the points in the SCL briefing note circulated in December (but disagreed with other points)
- DMG members think it's possible to take a 'short cut' to the appropriate deer management actions
- The alternative proposal is based on a 'committee effort' and is intended to improve the condition of Natura habitats & takes account of socio-economic interests
- DMG members accept the need for change
- Habitat targets are a topic for SNH to lead on
- Deer population targets and cull targets may be relatively easily agreed
- A programme of deer counts will be required

² SNH & FES hadn't been invited to, and therefore weren't represented at, the DMG meeting on 3 January.

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- There must be clearly defined roles & responsibilities

In response to Colin's presentation, Denise Reed (SNH & Chair) indicated that she was:

- Pleased that the DMG members had met to discuss the Strategic Management Planning proposal from SCL/SNH
- Encouraged by the 2018/2019 hind cull achievement to date
- Keen to work with DMG members to a shared, common agenda
- Looking to the Monadhliath DMG planning process as 'exemplary' and looking for Caenlochan to become an exemplar too
- Concerned that the DMG alternative proposal doesn't go far enough for what SNH needs; i.e. to create & deliver a strategic plan that offers significant improvement over the preceding plans

A wide-ranging discussion followed, characterised by a general sense of dis-satisfaction. To keep this note relatively brief, the key topics raised are included below in Annex 1, as questions and answers.

Deirdre Stewart emphasised that she was very disappointed by the SNH response to the DMG alternative proposal and that she was unaware that SNH had endorsed the SCL Briefing Note on a strategic planning process.

Drew McFarlane-Slack (Independent Chair of MDMG) pointed out that the preliminary outcomes of the review of deer management at Caenlochan by SCL were 'on the file' and that the report would be forthcoming (in April 2019) and that it was not surprising that SNH endorses the SCL proposals.

Neale Taylor (SNH) said that he recognised the positive proposal that the estates put forward and that, if this had come forward 5 years ago, he felt that SNH would have accepted it. However, he was concerned that, without a new approach which allowed land managers to agree a long-term vision for the future and take control of the situation on a wider basis than just the designated sites, that they (the owners), would continue to be locked-in to the narrow focus of protecting the designated areas. Ultimately, a sustainable alternative to a Control Agreement, to which land managers could agree, had to be the objective.

Deirdre explained that the DMGs wished to work 'with the grain' of the SCL findings and that the land owners are 'accountable to the data'. Deirdre expressed the view that the previous plans had not failed but that there had been a failure to deliver the plans.

Although there were tensions and disagreement around several of the discussion topics, there was broad agreement on the proposal to form a 'Task & Finish' group; to discuss and agree a 'statement of requirements' for a meaningful planning process.

Deirdre nominated the following people for the T&F group:

- Bill Mearns
- Florian Kuhnle
- Bruce Cooper
- Angus McNicol
- Richard Gledson
- Deirdre Stewart
- Colin McClean

It was suggested by Drew McFarlane-Slack that, ideally, the T&F group members will have executive authority from the property they represent and that there is scope to involve others in the group; either as 'observers' or as 'technical advisers'. There is no intention of the relatively

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small T&F group being 'exclusive'. On the contrary, T&F group members will be expected to represent & share the views of other DMG members. The smaller size of the group is based solely on the requirement to make the early stages of the planning process 'more manageable' (than it would be if most or all the members of the 2 DMGs were directly involved).

Denise Reed indicated that, if other people are interested in being part of the Task & Finish Group, then they should come forward during (or after) the meeting.

It was suggested that the Task & Finish group should be administered by SNH and would need to: 1) discuss and agree a Statement of Requirements for the planning process and 2) agree details associated with funding & procuring the services of a competent individual or organisation to carry out the planning work.

It was also suggested that the Task & Finish Group may subsequently 'morph' into a different form and with a different function; for example when there's a need to oversee the implementation of a planning process and, at the end of the planning process, when there's a need to oversee the implementation of the agreed plan.

Action 2:	Iain Hope (SNH) to provide a copy of Dougie Campbell's presentation, to Deirdre Stewart & Mike Cottam; for forwarding to DMG members.
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Action 3:	Any DMG member interested in sitting on the Task & Finish Group (& preferably who has executive authority for the property they represent) to contact either Iain Hope (SNH) or Deirdre Stewart (EGDMG1).
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Action 4:	Iain Hope (SNH) to make arrangements for a Task & Finish Group to meet at the earliest opportunity.
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5 2018/2019 Hind Culls

Deirdre summarised the 2018/2019 hind cull figures to date and there was a 'round-the-table' update on numbers. The figures and reports indicated that 1472 hinds had been culled in the Control Area to date; meaning that ~430 hinds are yet to be culled to achieve the target of 1,900 hinds from the Control Area.

Action 5:	Estate staff to continue making strenuous efforts to achieve the agreed 2018/2019 hind cull targets.
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6 Deer Count by Estate Staff (on 17 & 18 January 2019)

Estate staff had carried out a deer count (by direct observation, from the ground) and reported on the numbers of deer observed. A relatively very small number of deer had been observed (compared with the number counted by SNH in January 2018 and by SCL in summer 2018 by dung count).

There was a short discussion on the veracity of the latest deer count figures and the possible whereabouts of the several thousands of deer thought by some to be present but not recorded by estate staff at the time of the recent count.

It was re-emphasised that SNH had spent a lot of money on deer counts at Caenlochan and that there could be little doubt that deer densities (and impacts) remain very high. Consequently, Iain Hope (SNH) said that he sees no need for any more publicly-funded deer counts at Caenlochan at this stage.

Action 6:	All to keep under review the scope for carrying out a deer count, perhaps by helicopter and perhaps jointly funded.
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7 Any Other Business

There being no other business, Denise Reed expressed thanks to:

1. Drew McFarlane-Slack for attending the series of 3 meetings and for sharing helpful information & knowledge, on strategic planning processes, gained from experiences at the Monadhliath DMG
2. Dougie Campbell & the Strath Caulaidh team, for preparing for and giving the detailed presentations at each of the 3 meetings (over and above the terms of the SCL contract with SNH).
3. All the DMG members who'd attended the various meetings (including the DMG meeting on 3 January) and who have taken the trouble to engage and contribute positively; even although the topics are perhaps challenging and controversial.

The meeting was closed at about 8:15 pm.

Annex 1 Summary of Question (or comments) & Answer Session

Q1. Can the fenced area at Corrie Fee be used, as a useful comparison, to demonstrate the effects of reduced impacts by deer?

A1. The fences at Corrie Fee are relatively old and aren't deer proof. That said, monitoring data indicates that deer impacts are lower within the fenced area. Impact data from Corrie Fee suggests that browsing levels have increased in line with overall deer populations in recent years. The health of woolly willow had declined, probably due to browsing by deer and a lack of snow cover in winter.

Q2. The Tulchan WGS area is not directly comparable with higher altitude plateau areas and should not be cited as an example of grazing reduction alone (as other management interventions, such as ground preparation, had been carried out) ; it would be better to have representative 'control plots' (or benchmark sample areas).

A2. There was no intention to suggest that the Tulchan WGS area is analogous to higher altitude bog & heath habitats at Caenlochan. The Tulchan WGS area is however more directly comparable with habitats at similar relatively low levels at Caenlochan. Perhaps counter-intuitively, deer impacts are relatively greater at lower altitudes at Caenlochan.

The use of control plots is an accepted scientific method; for example, SNH has carried out repeat surveys of caged plot pairs on blanket bog at the Monadhliath SAC and elsewhere in Scotland. That said, there are significant technical & practical difficulties associated with establishing & maintaining control plots in remote, mountainous locations in particular because of snow fall, avalanche and landslides.

Q3. The base-rich soils at Caenlochan mean that the vegetation is relatively attractive to deer. The flora is dynamic, which means that managers should experiment with a mix of management measures.

A3. The SNH habitat targets set out in the current Control Agreement include a range of impacts for each habitat type, thus making some provision for a 'mix of measures'.

Q4. Sporting enterprises will be 'wiped out' if the deer population is reduced to 5 deer/km². At the Monadhliath DMG, Coignafearn Estate has been ruined.

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- A4. The strategic deer management planning process followed by Monadhliath DMG members meant that there was a robust process for addressing & dealing with key topics, especially (but not restricted to) management objectives on individual properties.
- Q5. Who will cover the costs associated with a loss of employment? Who will cover the cost of planting trees, or repairing roads damaged by timber-lorries?
- A5. The points about employment & costs are reflective of the conversations held during the MDMG strategic planning phase; the conversations tended to be long & difficult but eventually agreement was reached. Socio-economic matters should be integral to a strategic management planning process.
- Q6. 50 years ago, there were Government grants for draining bogs by ditching, now there're grants for blocking the drainage ditches that were created under grant.
- A6. Acknowledged; Government policy has changed over time and as new information becomes available.
- Q7. A large part of the problem is that deer are continuously disturbed by hill walkers; how can public access be better managed?
- A7. It's expected that a strategic planning process would identify & explore options for managing public access.
- With regard to disturbing deer, it's most likely that cull activities by estate staff exert a far greater intensity & duration of disturbance to deer than do hillwalkers.
- Q8. Land owners are working hard, at their own considerable expense, to deliver substantial public benefits!
- A8. Acknowledged & appreciated.
- Q9. Why hasn't SNH criticised deer management plans until now?
- A9. The review of deer management by Strath Caulaidh in 2018/2019 brings together a wealth of critical analysis which was hitherto unavailable; there is now an unprecedented body of data available upon which to view the previous 15 years of Control Agreements. The SNH view, on the basis of the recent work by SCL, is that previous and current deer management plans have failed to deliver the management required to deliver a marked improvement in the condition of qualifying habitats; this is thought to be a function of the quality of the plans and the extent to which the plans have been delivered.
- Q10. Why is a Strategic Land Management Plan required?
- A10. A strategic land management plan is needed precisely because of the history at the site, combined with the pressing need to deliver a 'step change'; in partnership between land owners and Government Agencies.
- Q11. The DMGs already have deer management plans; they just aren't delivering them!
- A11. The review of deer management by Strath Caulaidh is expected to reflect on the extent to which DMG members are either 'failing to implement' plans or if plans are being 'implemented but failing to deliver'. Either way, there is a pressing need for SNH to get the designated site into 'assured management'.
- Q12. The Control Agreement hasn't delivered/isn't delivering!

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A12. Answer 11 above refers. The review of deer management by Strath Caulaidh is expected to reflect on the extent to which there was/is a 'failure to implement' the Control Agreement or if the Agreement is being 'implemented but failing to deliver'. Either way, there is a pressing need for SNH to get the designated site into 'assured management'.

ENDS

DRAFT COPY