

Moidart Deer Management Group

Minutes of the Meeting

Slatach, Glenfinnan, Monday 17 August 2015, 4 pm

Present: Nino Stewart, Kinlochmoidart, Suzanne Stevens, Loch Shiel, Archie Gillies, Loch Ailort, David McCauley, Glenaladale, Gordon Shankland, Loch Shiel, Colin Lavin, FCS, John MacDonald, Glenuig, Jane Cheape, Glenaladale, Tim Leslie, Loch Ailort, Colin Surman, Roshven, Graeme Taylor, SNH, Ronald Cheape, Glenaladale, Iain MacAskill, Glenmoidart, Patrick Lees Millais, Glenmoidart, Robert Clegg, Glenuig, Hugh Cheape, Glenaladale (in the Chair).

The Chairman welcomed the members and thanked them for their attendance and support for the Moidart Deer Management Group [MDMG]. An Agenda had been circulated before the meeting and members had been asked if they wished to add any topic to what was proposed for discussion.

Apologies: apologies were received from Alistair Forbes, David Stewart Howitt, Colin Lees Millais, and Phil Green, Fire Services Liaison.

Minutes: the Minutes of the Meeting of the MDMG on 18 August 2014 had been circulated in draft after the last meeting, and had been re-circulated to members prior to this meeting. There were no corrections or amendments.

Matters arising: the Chairman raised the question of radios as a matter outstanding from the previous meeting. He expressed the understanding that radios were now essential for an effective Deer Count both for communication and in the interest of health and safety, that he believed that the MDMG had agreed at its last meeting to radios being acquired and that this issue was subsequently questioned. He offered a personal apology to the meeting and to those who had carried out the 2015 Count for radios not being made available. The meeting agreed that radios should be acquired for the MDMG and the suggestion was made that a trustworthy source might be the Scottish Communications Group. Radio frequencies were discussed and how these might be shared, for example, with neighbouring groups and SNH. Information and quotes for radios would be obtained (now available, 19.08.15). The Chairman reported briefly on the ADMG Meeting in Birnam (20 March 2015) reviewing progress on Deer Management Plans [DMPs] and on the Scottish Land and Estates Conference (19 May 2015) on 'Delivering the Public Interest'.

Deer Count (2015): the Chairman thanked the members for their work in carrying out the Moidart Deer Count. Totals were 627 stags, 1141 hinds and 326 calves. Observations were that there was a shortage of mature stags, that many deer were in a bad condition, calves noticeably, due to a prolonged wet winter, and that further mortality was expected in May and June. Good hinds and some promising young stags were seen. Frequency of counting was discussed, including availability of help for the on-the-ground team, support for neighbouring Deer Group counts, reliability and consistency of results and the possibility of a helicopter count. The offer of a helicopter count by SNH in 2013-14 had not been realised but SNH were able to assure the meeting that MDMG was still on their count programme and that application should be made for a helicopter count in 2016. The meeting discussed and agreed that a count should be planned for 2016 irrespective of the possibility of a helicopter count.

Cull: the deer cull was discussed at length and with more emphasis on numbers and target population than had been aired in recent meetings. The Chairman tabled a 'target population' samples paper that had been prepared for the Meeting by John MacDonald. In light of a perceived 'imbalance' of stags to hinds (627:1141), a reduction in stag cull was proposed by Tim Leslie with the aim of boosting the stags available in future years. The group agreed to respond to the low number of stags on the ground by shooting less this year and agreement was sought for a cull of 90 stags in the coming season. The suggestion was made that a population producing 100-120 'sporting stags' might be an ideal target and it was pointed out that to maintain a 'sustainable cull' of 120, a population of 900 stags should be predicted. Concerns were raised over changing plans and commitments so late on in the year and the Chairman cautioned against reducing overall culls while questions of absolute deer numbers and densities were such a prominent concern at national levels of debate. With regard to hinds, recent counts showed that, taken with this year's concerns of a higher than normal May mortality, hind numbers may be down by 25-30%. These projections were based on a significantly higher hind cull last season, particularly by one or two of the Moidart landholdings and the point was made that one estate shot approximately 25% of the hinds normally hefted to their ground. A round-table discussion agreed on a cull this year of 152 hinds with numbers assigned to each landholding. These targets and allocations were discussed against population models which are being generated for the DMP and the Chairman's concerns about overall deer numbers in the peninsula and a potential explosion of numbers in the event of better-than-normal weather.

Deer Management Plan, update and submission: the Chairman asked members to scrutinise the Habitat Impact Assessment plots and the Public Interest benchmarks documents that had been circulated. These provided guides to assembling information and data for DMPs which must be completed over the course of the next few months. The Chairman requested that members complete their input to the DMP as soon as possible so that a final draft could be edited for submission to SNH before the end of the calendar year. This would allow time for further editing before a February deadline and the examination of DMPs by the RACCE Committee and Scottish government in 2016. A number of issues fall to be considered amongst which the Chairman emphasised reconsideration of economic and social impacts of deer (value of deer to the Scottish economy), the strengths of a voluntary system of management of deer on the open hill by DMGs, the need for target populations to be backed up with data for habitat monitoring and targets for each of the other public interests as detailed in the benchmarks. Tim Leslie suggested that Inverailort evidenced no ill effects from deer numbers while the Chairman pointed out that public sector scientists are reporting on depletion of habitat and evidence of damage to designated sites and native woodland. The group members agreed that all should respond now to the needs for habitat assessment, the monitoring of deer vehicle collisions, public access, and weather and commercial issues on an ongoing basis to help reach a 'right' number of deer.

Any other business: the Chairman asked if there was any other business. The question was raised about non-compliance (for whatever reason) with the requirement to produce DMPs and the response was offered that it was clear by now that a 'voluntary system' for sustainable deer management would be replaced by a statutory imposition of duties with penalties. In concluding, the Chairman thanked those attending. The date of the next meeting was remitted for future confirmation. The meeting closed at 7 pm.