

Moidart Deer Management Group

Minutes of the Meeting

Slatach, Glenfinnan, Monday 18 August 2014, 4 pm

Present: Colin Lees Millais, Glenmoidart, Nino Stewart, Kinlochmoidart, David McCauley, Glenaladale, Archie Gillies, Loch Ailort, Gordon Shankland, Loch Shiel, John MacDonald, Glenuig, Eilean Shona, Ardmolich FE, Iain MacAskill, Glenmoidart, Suzanne Stevens, Loch Shiel, Robert Clegg, Glenuig, Colin Lavin, FCS, Graeme Taylor, SNH, Alistair Forbes, Roshven, Ronald Cheape, Glenaladale, Lynda Campbell, ADMG, Jane Cheape, Glenaladale, James Neill, Roshven, Colin Surman, Roshven, Hugh Cheape, Glenaladale (in the Chair).

The Chairman welcomed all those attending and thanked them for contributing individually and severally to such a strong quorum to represent the interests of the Moidart Deer Management Group [MDMG]. An Agenda had been circulated before the meeting and members were asked if they wished to add any topic to what was proposed for discussion. Archie Gillies had suggested that radios as an aid to deer counting might be reconsidered.

Apologies: apologies were received from John Jackson, FCS, and Tim Leslie, Loch Ailort.

Minutes: the Minutes of the Meeting of the MDMG on 16 May 2013 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 suggested that substantive and ongoing matters such as the Deer Management Plan [DMP] and the Deer Count could be discussed as agenda matters. The meeting agreed. The meeting was asked through the Chair to offer a definition of the 'public interest' as criterion for the response of land managers and owners to present and future expectations of land management in the Highlands. It was agreed that there was no easy or satisfactory definition, that adopting the term 'interest' might more fairly represent the situation and that it was in the 'interest' of managers and owners to sustain a measured and proportionate response to public objectives and to the imperatives of a changing political environment.

ADMG briefing: the Chairman asked Lynda Campbell to report on the ADMG spring meeting in Birnam, 19 May 2014. The 'benchmark' for deer management had been finalised and updates circulated in the ADMG Newsletter, *Scope*. Deer management groups were being strongly advised to complete DMPs in order to demonstrate by 2016 that the 'voluntary principle' would continue to be workable in the deer sector. Statements of aims of deer groups, supported by the relevant public agencies where support is sought, should reflect agreed benchmarks and a reasoned balance between land management and community interests. A point was raised about deer groups employing professional help such as paid secretaries. Discussion suggested that this might make a difference in large deer groups with varieties of sometimes conflicting interests, but the aims and objectives of the MDG were shared and, at least for the present, the Group's business could be handled in-house. The meeting then agreed on a succinct and appropriate definition of 'interest' as being 'a healthy herd, a healthy hill'.

MDMG Deer Management Plan update: the Chairman reported that he had not yet completed the DMP beyond the draft circulated to the Group in 2013 and that core statistics needed updated, issues of deer impact and habitat monitoring taken forward and target figures agreed. He reiterated the need for the Group to consider remitting the preparation of the DMP to paid professional help and for a more streamlined approach to information gathering, editing and updating to equip the Group with a more dynamic document. The meeting suggested that a DMP in simpler format would achieve required ends and that steps would be taken to adopt such a format in finalising the plan. It was pointed out that in the future DMPs would need to be accessible online and that a simpler format would fit this need. The meeting agreed that aspects of the DMP needed strengthening, in particular land classification and land-use descriptions to further clarify components of land-use and environmental impact; in the situation of Moidart, for example, absolute deer numbers should be presented relative to other livestock such as cattle and sheep and their grazing needs and the overall context of a 'mixed economy'.

Counting and cull targets: the Chairman reported that the proposed deer count had not taken place due to adverse weather conditions and lack of manpower. David McCauley reiterated the circumstances of size of team and 'weather window' and the professional will to achieve a regular deer count. SNH had hoped to include the MDG in their helicopter-count schedule and this offer could be revived, depending also on available finance. The meeting discussed the evident breakdown of collaborative counting and measures to be taken to ensure that counting would take place. A conclusion was proposed that a count every second or third year might include a helicopter count using funds earmarked for annual or bi-annual counts, and that collaborative helicopter counts might be investigated with a neighbouring deer group. Cull targets were discussed in the light of higher than average mortality. Severe cold and wet winter weather has resulted in reports such as 40 carcasses around the area of Slatlach. By contrast, John MacDonald commented that such mortality had not been evident in the coast lands.

Habitat monitoring: on behalf of the MDG the Chairman thanked SNH for the very successful habitat monitoring day held at Slatlach on Friday 20 June 2014. The event was very well attended. Graeme Taylor opened a discussion on the selection of 'testing plots' for the measurement of impact and a benchmark of 30 areas or points of inspection. As a general principle herbivore impact should be regularly assessed in spring and early summer and the data recorded every 2-3 years. All agreed that this was a relatively quiet time of year in the work schedule and Graeme has offered further briefing and support for habitat and plot selection.

Any other business: the point was raised that a speedy and efficient deer count would be aided by equipping the team with radios. It was agreed that the radios previously acquired would no longer be serviceable since the battery units were obsolete and that the Group would take advice on appropriate technology and the use of shared frequencies. Colin Lavin reported to the meeting that the FCS levy paid to ADMG would henceforward be paid as a local subscription. The Chairman welcomed this change towards a local accountability.

In concluding additional business, the Chairman thanked those attending for their support and advice and for ensuring such a full representation for the MDG at a time when demonstration of commitment to the deer and hill-land sector was so important. The date of the next meeting was remitted for future confirmation. The meeting closed at 6 pm.