

Inveraray & Tyndrum Deer Management Group

Summary Minutes of the Meeting on Wednesday 10th November 2021 at 10am by MS Teams call (online)

Present: Hugh Nicol – Argyll Estates (Chair), David Lowes – Glenfalloch (Vice Chair), Helen MacIntyre (Secretary), Jimmy Irvine – NatureScot, Peter Kelly – NatureScot Ben Lui, Tom Turnbull – ADMG Rep, Nicola Colquhoun – LLTNP, representatives from Argyll Estates, Blarghour, Scottish Woodlands, Glenfalloch, Ardkinglas, Inveruglas, Forestry and Land Scotland, Auchreoch, Strathfillan, Stuckendroin, Tilhill, and Ardchnnell.

Apologies: Glen Croe Farm

1. Welcome and apologies – HN thanked everyone for attending. See above for apologies. HN noted his regret that we could not meet in person as planned and for the short notice change to an online meeting, but was glad to see many online today.

2. Matters arising from minutes of meeting 21st April

Regarding members leaving the group, DL has spoken to John Little at Tilhill to try to encourage their clients to remain part of the group. Collaboration is important for managing deer. Minutes accepted by all.

3. Chairman's Report – Hugh Nicol

Since the last meeting he has attended several ADMG meetings and spoken to members. Congratulations were given to Tom Turnbull who is now Chair of ADMG. It is great to see him in that position and no doubt he will make a big difference. All other current issues will be covered elsewhere in the agenda.

4. Election of Office Bearers

Thank you to Jean Maskell at Ardkinglas who retired recently and has been our treasurer for many years. We are grateful that Virginia Sumsion will now take on that role at Ardkinglas.

HN is stepping down as Chair today. Nominations for Chair: Falcon Frost. FF gave a summary of his experience in deer management, including being the stalker at Glenfalloch for 25 years, a previous Chair of Balquhiddier DMG, an active member in both ITDMG and BqDMG, and he sits on the ADMG executive committee. There were no objections and Falcon was elected as the new Chair of ITDMG.

HN has been asked to remain on the executive committee and is happy to do so. DL said a huge thank you to Hugh for carrying the group for so many years and being a steady hand on the helm, working with great professionalism and diligence. DL remains as Vice Chair but is keen to point out that he is very happy to stand aside if anyone else would like the role. He does not want it to appear that Glenfalloch are taking control of the group. HN thanked DL for stepping in as acting Chair last year.

The executive committee is always welcoming of new members and currently has a balanced spread of group members.

5. Secretary and Treasurer Reports

Secretary's report - HM

Just a gentle reminder to please try your best to get cull returns and other information to the secretary as early as possible, otherwise it delays sending the group tables out to everyone before meetings.

It has been confirmed that we have lost one group member - Cladich Forest, which is managed by Tilhill. The executive committee have been doing everything they can to try to encourage them to stay. Glen Shira were considering leaving but are remaining a member for the time being.

Treasurer's report - HM

Subscription income will be slightly lower in 2022-23 due to losing one member and FLS still being in credit. Members discussed and agreed the level to set subscriptions this year.

The group HIA project final payment invoices will be going out after this meeting. The members involved will notice they are significantly higher than the first payments in 2018. This is because in 2018 we had around 90% funding. This time we have no funding. There are still a few HIA payments outstanding from 2018.

6. Culls

a) Results of stag cull 2021 – Members comments included: seeing quite a few stags about, had a stop-start rut with the majority of stags in very good condition; very warm, damp weather for the rut, with mature stags not appearing till later in the rut; there was quite a lot of mist, a few blank days, and they were slightly short of mature stags.

b) Proposed hind cull 2021/22 – There was a discussion about difficulty classifying whether a deer is open hill or woodland when there is unfenced woodland. HN encourages everyone to put in cull targets otherwise we would be sitting here blind.

c) Future count plans –

The group have not had a successful spring foot count since the helicopter count in 2017. Members were asked their views on future group counts. Most agreed we should continue doing a spring count as we have historic data and it is easier to distinguish deer in spring. We have not been very lucky with the weather recently, but maybe if we get a very good count then we can do a count every 2 years, which might encourage more members to count. We really need everyone to participate. We all need to be more flexible on dates, so if a count doesn't go ahead we can do it the next best day. We might have to start looking at paying for drone counts etc. JI said NatureScot are trialling satellite and drones to replace helicopters, the technology is improving but there are still issues of scale and how much a drone can count at one time before the operator has to move position. At present they are not able to gather all the information you would in a foot count. It's their hope that in 2-3 years time it might be a viable alternative. JI said if a count is a priority for NatureScot they will pay for it, but for most DMGs they would look for contributions, though some DMGs fund their own counts. The DWG recommendation is to not focus on counting, but they also recommend ensuring densities are not too high.

It was discussed whether we should we count on a weekend to accommodate members. Some members have a number of walkers at weekends so they wouldn't be able to count deer due to disturbance. It was suggested we plan 3 Mondays in a row rather than moving it to next best day. **Action:** FF to talk to HM after meeting to set count date.

d) Population model

HM has put the proposed culls into the open hill model, but since we have not had a successful count since 2017 the model is not likely to be that accurate.

FLS culls are driven by damage and densities on restocks, and they use dung counts and nearest neighbour assessments.

HN asked JI if there is anything else we can be doing. JI said until you get a good count, not much more you can do. In comparison to other groups, others are more open hill and don't have the same problems, but we are more advanced in our discussions than some other groups.

7. Game Dealer & Larder Arrangements

HN asked if everyone is happy with their arrangements just now. TK has taken over from Fyne Game, it's a very difficult industry, in July, August Sept taking in 20 beasts, then into Oct getting 120-150 beasts a week. It is almost impossible to move all these carcasses on to dealers. If everyone could all do their bit and start shooting stags a bit earlier it would make it easier. Meat is better quality if you shoot them before the rut.

8. Habitat Impact Assessments

The separate map circulated shows the results of assessments done individually by group members this year. There is also data from other members to add.

Nikki Dayton from Quadrat Scotland talked through her report on the group HIA project work from this year. The results show an increase in higher levels of browsing and trampling impacts on dwarf shrub heath (DSH). On blanket bog (BB), browsing impacts decreased but trampling slightly increased. Of most concern was the heather vegetation heights decreasing across most estates. The DMG has a small heather resource in general and this is being targeted by herbivores so we have a decreasing resource.

There was a discussion on how to differentiate deer and sheep impacts. ND said you need to look at where the deer and sheep are. The impacts are definitely higher where you have sheep and deer rather than just deer. Sheep do graze slightly differently, and you can see that with larger heather but not so much with small heather. Deer like the new shoots, a 40cm high heather bush has many more new shoots than a 10cm high bush so impacts on smaller bushes are much higher.

It was pointed out that we are discussing this as a DMG and the impacts on our cull targets, but the impacts caused by other herbivores are also present. Should we wait for more years of data before changing deer management? ND said two 2 lots of data is not enough to make a trend, but because the heather is so sparse you can't afford to wait 10 years before making changes.

ND asked if sheep are off-wintered. She explained that in Breadalbane DMG they noticed a big difference in heather condition in just three years when sheep were removed in winter since they graze more on heather in winter. One member said their sheep were removed in 2007 and the abundance of heather has increased so phenomenally in that time.

One member commented we have got this body of work done over a large area of land, but we need to consider each landowner's priorities, some for whom deer is not a priority and others who it is a priority. The objective of doing the work was to encourage individuals to go down the HIA route and explore their own land and impacts. It was suggested we add sheep presence or numbers onto maps. Heather is an important consideration for livestock over the winter.

One member asked in terms of the overall goal for protecting natural heritage how do we put the results in perspective? ND said obviously there are some protected areas within the DMG, once peatland loses vegetation and opens up the sphagnum layer and exposes the peat then you are losing carbon dioxide. PK said from a NatureScot perspective on the HIA results it's not all bad news, and the reduction of impacts on blanket bog is really good news. He reiterated that it is the impacts of herbivores in general that are assessed, and sheep are going to have a really big impact, but not all estates have control over their sheep numbers, and a few years ago the sheep density was estimated at double the deer density. There is still work that needs to be done with both

sheep and deer where impacts are shown to be damaging. Commenting on the need for a long term data set, he would caution that the HIA methods do show a snapshot of the current impacts so we should take it as an alarm bell that something needs to be done soon. We can probably expect less snow in winter over coming years and this will lead to greater impacts on the vegetation. It is important to get more people on board to monitor impacts and get better information on sheep numbers. ND says the heather resource is so small that impacts are much higher with our number of deer. Heather is a really important resource for maintaining the deer overwinter.

HN said this HIA is the biggest thing that we have done in recent years and thanks to everyone for their efforts on this. There are still some members to get on board. We haven't discussed peatland much recently, and will consider whether to be a land management group in the future.

9. Deer Management Plan

The Autumn update of the Plan will be completed once all the HIA results come in. We need to decide as a group what are our priorities, for example HIAs, native woodland restoration, peatlands. Now that NatureScot is no longer assessing DMGs and we are waiting for the Scottish Government to decide how to implement the Deer Working Group recommendations everything feels a bit in limbo. What do group members want to focus on? One member said getting counts done and a good population model is priority so we can understand our deer better.

HN asked the agricultural and forestry members for their priorities. One agricultural member said from their perspective no major change is needed, with what we have started on HIAs and to a lesser extent on the peatland, he thinks it is a good start and we should see what trends come out over time.

A forestry member said in an ideal world they would like to restock and plant without deer fencing, and that involves collaborative deer management with neighbours. There will undoubtedly be more woodland planting in the future which will affect deer management. HN said we are open to everyone's thoughts and views, and will discuss this again next meeting.

Jl commented that over the last 5-10 years ITDMG have focused on key priorities from SNH, including HIAs, peatlands etc. Going forward that is not going to change, and deer management will be linked to the climate crisis and green recovery. As a group you are already looking at data and interpreting it to deliver your objectives, with a balance of objectives for what everyone wants within the group. He supports the focus on making sure everyone is carrying out a count so we can use the information for management decisions.

10. ADMG Report

TT gave his report. The full report is circulated separately. Highlights include:

- We are all waiting for the Scottish Government to implement the 90 Deer Working Group recommendations that were accepted.
- ADMG have had several online meetings, the latest was a meeting of Chairs and Secretaries. They hope to have more of those meetings going forward so they can have a closer link to members which is important.
- SQWV membership giving 40p premium just now.
- July 2022 is the deadline when most dealers will stop taking lead-shot venison.
- Anyone who is having access issues please let ADMG know, also any positive experiences are welcome.
- There are some concerns over September culling of hinds and calves by FLS. ADMG are clear that they prefer deer to be culled in season whenever possible and deer welfare should always be taken into account.

A member asked about the SQWV premium. One member said he is getting £1.50/kg through Highland Game,

but also has to pay membership. The added benefit from being a member is that he can then demonstrate that he has high quality standards for the food chain.

11. NatureScot report

Jl gave an update. 92 of 99 recommendations from the Deer Working Group Report have been accepted and there is legislation that needs to be put in place for most of these. NatureScot has made progress on how to deliver some of them but they are not ready to share this with DMGs yet. Jl thinks ITDMG are well placed for the future as we have been meeting many of the ScotGov/NatureScot objectives for years.

Trials on the use of Image Intensifying Devices (thermals/night vision) are still ongoing.

12. Any Other Business

DL explained that Glenfalloch were invited to join a delegation for COP26 regarding peatland restoration. They have restored 200 ha so far and took part in a short film about it. **Action** - HM to circulate. HN said it might be interesting for other members to have a look at what Glenfalloch have been doing with peatland restoration.

For the record, FF would like to do 2-3 years as Chair, no more.

David Bavin of the Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) had planned to attend the face-to-face meeting to speak to ITDMG members directly. He had previously addressed an online meeting for ADMG members in July where some ITDMG members were present. When the ITDMG meeting changed to online, he did not attend but asked for the following to be noted to members:

“The Lynx to Scotland study seeks to investigate the social feasibility of the potential for lynx reintroduction to Scotland. It was conceived by Trees For Life and Scotland: The Big Picture, who approached Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) to objectively undertake the work. The study aims to engage with stakeholders and communities in the Cairngorms and Argyll to explore the potential opportunities and challenges associated with living with lynx. The study is not attached to a proposal to reintroduce lynx; it is an exploratory exercise to inform the conversation, and to provide some baseline information from which a decision can be made as to whether feasibility should be further investigated. I (David Bavin) am keen to hear from you should you wish to share your view on the potential for lynx reintroduction to Scotland. This will inform the results of the study which will be written up for the funding partners by the end of February 2022”.

13. Date of Next Meeting – Wednesday 20th April 2022 was agreed. Venue to be confirmed.