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**CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

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**FOR DISCUSSION**

**Title: MOUNTAIN HARES**

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**Purpose**

This paper sets out the current position of the CNPA on hare culling and is an opportunity for the Board to discuss the position.

**Recommendations**

**The Board is asked to discuss the current Cairngorms National Park Authority position on mountain hare management and culling.**

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## MOUNTAIN HARES – FOR DISCUSSION

### Background

1. In Scotland, heather moorland that is actively managed for grouse provides an optimum habitat for mountain hares, as the rotational burning ensures that there is always young heather growth available. Large numbers of hares can be found on some moors - the highest population densities occur on those hills in the eastern Highlands with more fertile soils, where the best habitats can sometimes support over 200 hares per km<sup>2</sup>. Typical densities elsewhere are much lower - between 2 and 5/km<sup>2</sup>. Hare numbers fluctuate on a cyclical basis, by ten-fold or more, peaking approximately every nine years or so.
2. The mountain hare is our only truly montane/arctic mammal and is restricted to high ground (generally above 300-400m).

### Legal Status

3. Mountain hares are a protected species under the following legislation:
  - a) Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended.
  - b) Listed in Annex V of the EU Habitats Directive (1992) which requires EU member states to maintain them in favourable conservation status.

### Current Management Regime

4. Under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011, it is an offence to kill a Mountain Hare in the closed season (1 March to 31 July) without a licence from SNH. SNH have also recently ruled out giving any licences for snaring of mountain hares. In the open season hare culling is undertaken mainly by estates that are managed for red grouse.
5. In general mountain hares are culled for 2 main reasons:
  - a) To control louping ill, a virus that affects red grouse and is transmitted by ticks.
  - b) To control impacts on new woodland plantations and/or natural regeneration.
6. There is also some sport shooting of mountain hares carried out by some estates.

### **Current Policy Position**

7. In December 2014 SNH, GWCT and SL&E called for 'voluntary restraint' on large-scale culls of mountain hares which could jeopardise the conservation status of mountain hares.
8. One of the main issues was the lack of reliable information about mountain hare populations at a national and local scale. SNH with the James Hutton Institute (JHI) and Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) began a three-year joint study to trial several methods of assessing mountain hare population densities to determine the number of hare's in a particular area.
9. Currently most of the information on hare population trends is drawn from reports to GWCT about the number of hares shot on estates (game bags). The last national estimate, published in 1995, suggested that there were 350,000 mountain hares in Scotland, but this estimate had error margins of plus or minus 50%.
10. A number of these trials are ongoing in the Cairngorms National Park and information should be available in 2018/19.
11. In 2015 ten wildlife and conservation organisations called for a three-year ban on the culling of mountain hares on Scotland's grouse moors.

### **Current Campaign**

12. Onekind Scotland has a current campaign to make mountain hare culls in National Parks illegal. There is an on-line petition and also a postcard campaign. There have been 450+ postcards sent to the CNPA asking for the CNPA to ban hare culls.

### **Current CNPA position**

13. The cull of any species should be justified on sound environmental or economic reasons that are in the public interest. In the case of deer, culls are justified on the grounds that they allow the restoration of depleted habitat and in the longer term lead to a healthier environment and consequently a healthier herd. Hare culls similarly, may be necessary in some locations e.g. to allow woodland regeneration or to prevent damage to planted trees. The CNPA have concerns about the public interest justification and scale of culling for the primary purpose of tick control.

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**Paper 3 9 June 2017**

14. CNPA accept that culling of hares may be justified and necessary in some circumstances but we do not advocate large-scale culls unless there is clear evidence to demonstrate extremely high densities which are causing significant problems.
15. The CNPA want to see greater transparency on what level of culling is taking place in the Cairngorms and the reasons for culling. Mountain hares are an important species in the Cairngorms and we want to ensure healthy populations across their natural range.

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