

CAIRNGORMS DEER ADVISORY GROUP

Minutes of meeting held on

Wednesday 13th March 2013

at **The Lecht**

Present

Michael Hone (Chair), Will Boyd-Wallis, Jamie Williamson, Dick Balharry, Chris Donald, Patrick Thompson, Pete Mayhew, Julian Clarke, Penny Lawson (minutes).

1. Welcome and apologies.

Julian Clarke from Atholl Estates, who is replacing David Greer in representing West Grampian DMG, was introduced and welcomed.

Apologies received from:

Simon Blackett, John Bruce, Justin Irvine, Colin Sheddon, Ewan Cameron, Roger Clegg, George MacDonald, Alasdair Colquhoun, Colin McClean, Hamish Trench.

2. Deer Framework update

Progress against a key actions for delivery of the Framework were discussed, incorporating wider discussion on CDAG's role overall.

2.1 *'Openly and amicably seek to resolve deer related issues arising from competing land management objectives'* (Estates and DMGs).

Previous actions such as mapping aspirational deer densities and the Mar Lodge review have helped. However, recent media coverage has portrayed deer management conflicts at Caenlochan and in the Monadhliaths. This illustrates the fragility of standing agreements for an open and amicable approach, and the need to work hard to maintain them. A national level meeting of DMG chairs and secretaries is taking place this Friday and will address the issue of conflict resolution, including the role of DMGs. Several CDAG members are going and will report back to ensure CDAG is in line with national thinking. The need for the right representation to contribute to the various forums on deer was discussed, and it was agreed that discussion at meetings between those involved is much preferable to disagreements being expressed publicly in the media.

There was unanimous support for the role and functions of DMGs to be reviewed nationally. This is being considered and will be timetabled by the Scottish Government in due course.

It was noted that the function of groups like CDAG has become more important as deer management has evolved over time and land managers' objectives have become more diverse.

Deer MPs should include socio-economic aspects such as reference to number of jobs for stalkers, but it should be recognised that maintaining the health of the deer themselves and the environment is fundamental to the sustainability of any social or economic gain from deer. The group was reminded of the 'vision' for deer in the Deer Framework, which deliberately avoided use of the word 'sustainable' ie *'Their populations are managed to ensure the habitats upon which they depend for food and shelter are protected and enhanced. The long-term vitality of deer and the economy which depends upon them is secure for future generations.'*

2.2 *'Help raise awareness of Best Practice methods for monitoring habitats and deer populations'* (SNH).

SNH are replacing their previous big, two day events with a programme of shorter training events focussing on specific topics.

An update from SNH on the condition status of Joint Working sites within the DMG areas was requested, preferably presented as a map.

Action: CD to look into the best way of providing this information to circulate to members andr present and update at next meeting.

2.3 *'Promote awareness and understanding of the role deer management plays in the local economy and the management of important habitats.'* (CNPA)

An update was given on progress with provision of deer stalking awareness signs for use at popular access points to stalking areas. The signs have been successfully developed and trialled with the help of CDAG members and Invercauld Estate. 17 signs have been supplied to four estates, with signs for three estates in production and a further three estates interested. It was noted that the new signs are a huge improvement on many out of date signs still being used, and are much more likely to attract walker's attention, thereby raising awareness of deer management. These signs are designed specifically in relation to deer stalking. Other access issues relating to dogs, ground nesting birds, etc are covered by other measures such as National Access Forum guidance and RSPB signs.

The new National Park Partnership Plan 2, although it refers to reducing 'conflicts in species and wildlife management', does not list deer management as a stand-alone priority for action. This reflects progress through the Deer Framework but there is still work to be done, making it all the more important to maintain the prominence of the Deer Framework and CDAG.

3. Future of CDAG

Various aspects were discussed including what the main purpose of CDAG is, how its role fits with those of DMGs and ADMG, etc, what it needs to do to attract and retain active members, and how its role can be developed. Opinions expressed included:

- Deer are still a major issue in CNP so the overseeing role of CDAG in bringing relevant parties together, co-ordinating dialogue, and discussing overarching principles remains essential and central to its role. Good examples are the on-going discussions around aspirational deer densities and fencing policy. It also provides advice and assists communication with the public (eg Heading for the Scottish Hills website), the media, and is a vehicle for deer managers to advise the CNPA Board. It is particularly valuable in demonstrating that there is a high degree of agreement on many issues as well as some conflict, which serves to balance media exaggeration.
- Much deer management is done at the level of fairly discreet regional populations and is best covered by DMGs. However, there are strong links between geographical areas, some issues do apply over the CNP as a whole, and CDAG provides a unique forum to discuss these.
- CDAG should not duplicate the role of DMGs.
- Estate Deer management plans should be encouraged by CDAG.
- CNP Board are unlikely to agree to executive powers for CDAG, but CDAG can directly influence CNPA (or other organisation's) spending on 'products' such as the stalking awareness signs and training. It was agreed that initiating this type of tangible project is a valuable role which should be continued.
- As a discussion forum CDAG has a good track record of improving communication and understanding between members with mainly conservation objectives and those with sporting objectives as a priority – this can and has affected land management decisions in the longer term and should be kept going. "Don't underestimate the value of talking openly to address deer management issues"
- Agendas need to reflect important and current critical issues.

It was agreed that future meetings would benefit from including outside speakers such as relevant researchers and being hosted by estates willing to do tours, or speakers from estates outlining their approach to deer management; all of which are likely to boost attendance. Suggestions included a stalker or a representative from Inchroy Estate to speak, and Alvie and Balmoral Estates as venues.

Action: WBW to investigate speaker for next meeting.

Action: JW to confirm availability of Alvie Estate to host (now confirmed).

4. Membership of CDAG

It was agreed to co-opt Thomas MacDonell as a new standing member representing Cairngorms Speyside DMG. Thomas is a prominent figure in the deer world, whose knowledge and experiences will be a valuable addition to CDAG.

Action: WBW/PL to invite Thomas to next meeting.

5. Road issues – RTAs and population segregation

John Bruce had sent a letter to Transport Scotland (TS) highlighting concerns about the potential effects of the dualling of the A9 on deer collisions and on segregation of deer populations on the east and west sides of the road. It was not felt that the additional barrier to mixing of deer resulting from the dualling would significantly

worsen the risk of inbreeding over the current situation, where deer are already separated by the A9 and the Spey. However, it appears from a recent public consultation in Kingussie that TS have not yet given much consideration to deer issues and they have asked for more information. It was agreed that CDAG should write to TS now to ensure that the planning process gives due consideration to deer at an early stage, to offer advice and to provide any information available on known 'hotspots', deer movements, etc.

Action: WBW to draft a letter for circulation to members.

All: to feed in relevant information.

6. 'Sustainable Deer Management' – is it happening in CNP?

This topic was largely covered under item 2 above.

It was raised with particular reference to Caenlochan and the Monadhliath SAC. Both these cases are examples of how the principles in the Deer Framework can be used to avoid public discussion of sensitive issues via the media.

Surveys and research are on-going to investigate the causes of the non-favourable condition status of the Monadhliath SAC, and a subgroup of the DMG has been set up to review the DMP with the assistance of SNH. The scientific methods used to assess habitat condition were discussed, and it was agreed it would be helpful to have a presentation on this subject, though it was pointed out that the limitations of the scope and objectives of surveys and experiments should be borne in mind when evaluating them.

7. AOCB

7.1 Chairing of CDAG

The CDAG remit (last updated in February 2010) states *CDAG members will choose a chair, after wide soundings for a candidate have been made. This chair will serve a three year term, after which CDAG is free to re-elect for another three years or to seek an alternative candidate. From time to time CDAG may choose to appoint a vice chair, especially to run any sub group that may be needed.*

It was agreed that it is good practice to review chairmanship of the group periodically, to offer the opportunity for healthy change and ensure the group is run democratically. It was agreed to invite nominations for a new Chair and hold a ballot if necessary.

Action: all members to submit nominations to WBW.

8. Date of next meeting

Date agreed (27 June 2013) has now been postponed. New date TBC.