

# Minutes

## Cairngorms Upland Advisory Group

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May

Virtual Meeting

### Attendees

Alison Hester (research)	Anne Rae MacDonald (CNPA Board)
Chris Donald (SNH)	Claire Smith (RSPB)
Dave Windle (NEMT)	David Frew (NTS)
David Hetherington (CNPA, minutes)	John Grierson (AoCC)
John Risby (SF)	Judith Webb (Chair)
Mike Cottam (CNPA)	Pete Mayhew (CNPA)
Richard Cooke (ADMG)	Richard Gledson (ECMP)
Will Boyd-Wallis (CNPA)	

Apologies: Adam Smith, Alex Jenkins, Colin Shedden, Lynn Cassells, Sandy Davidson, Stephen Young, Thomas MacDonell and Will Anderson

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1. JW welcomed everyone to the meeting
2. PM gave an overview of the two main COVID-19 recovery plans being worked on by CNPA which were relevant to CUAG - the Green Recovery Plan and the Visitor Lockdown Easing Plan.

Green Recovery Plan – in line with the 4 ScotGov actions – Respond, Reset, Restart and Recovery. This will look at businesses and communities; conservation & land management; access, and a capital investment programme.

Scenario Planning for Visitor Management – preparing for a potential large number of people coming to national parks post-Lockdown. Work needs to focus on where the key pinch-points are likely to be; what do we need e.g. car park management, ranger services; and communications, in particular the need to be positive, consistent and concise.
3. WBW mentioned a few areas of concern that the CNPA were already aware of (e.g. from other CUAG members by email), such as deer management, field surveys, gamebird shooting, and muirburn, and then opened it up to the group.

- Deer

MC explained that some estates were still managing deer to protect trees etc. and were doing so in communication with local police, but that this did not appear to be consistent between different police divisions.

DF said NTS were desperate to get stalkers out to control deer to protect tree regeneration but they were not stalking because they'd been following SNH advice.

RC explained that the venison market was closed because of the need for social distancing in processing and packaging areas, while local sales were of an insufficient scale. He urged that ScotGov should provide guidance on how the venison market could be allowed to recover.

He also felt there would be little commercial stalking this year, partly because of difficulties of foreign travel and the need for social distancing in accommodation.

CD said that, if anything, ScotGov had recently made measures more stringent but that there was another meeting with ScotGov in 2 days, where the subject would be further explored.

When asked about Scottish Forestry's take on deer management affecting regen, JR said that SF would not be taking a hard line on tree damage in grant schemes, so if damage occurs SF will not be seeking to recover grants. Similarly if people are unable to undertake herbivore impact assessments (HIA) in the normal way then they should do what they can and let SF know.

PM asked about the acceptability of leaving deer carcasses on the hill, in light of deer needing to be culled, but the commercial venison market being suspended. RC felt many estates would be culturally opposed to this and would therefore not practise it.

DF and CS said that their organisations at Mar Lodge and Abernethy currently only wished to cull a small amount of deer at critical locations, mainly to counter observed increase in fearlessness.

- Fisheries

ARM raised the matter of fisheries as had WA by email, with concerns of reduced income for estates and fishery boards also receiving reduced income from levies.

- Fieldwork

JR felt it was too early to say what effect COVID-19 would have on reaching woodland creation targets, but missing seasonal surveys e.g. nesting birds, would be a significant issue.

CS said that several ecological surveyors were still working. CIEEM advice allowed people to do fieldwork if social distancing was followed. However, this is based on DEFRA advice and should not therefore apply to Scotland.

RC said it was difficult for estates to perform environmental audits, and therefore to receive grant payments. Peatland Action-funded projects will lag behind, and CD confirmed that Peatland Action work had been deemed by ScotGov to be non-essential.

ARM also suggested that grants dependent on moorland management plans requiring muirburn may also be affected by the curtailed burning season.

- Farming

ARM said that farmers are concerned about the combined effects of Brexit-related market uncertainty with COVID-19 restrictions.

DW said the NEMT was concerned about reports that some farmers were using the Lockdown as a reason to keep the public off their land.

- Visitor return

There was discussion about the effects of a potential surge in visitor numbers in the national park when Lockdown is lifted, especially if there are still restrictions on foreign travel. DF said this was a big issue for NTS as more rangers would be needed at a time when NTS does not have the money to pay for them. They would be employing no seasonal rangers this year because of reduced income.

JW said that we all need to think not just about the current impacts, but also the longer term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on operations and activities across the national park. She urged everyone to come back with any further comments or suggestions by email to DH.

## **Summary of key points**

- There is a need for clear and consistent messaging about COVID-19 impacts on land management.
- The land management sector in the Park is important, both economically and in terms of delivering public benefits. It is facing several challenges which need to be appreciated and understood, and communicated to Scottish Government.
- Estates are interpreting restrictions on deer management differently – some are undertaking stalking with social distancing measures, while others have ceased completely, creating management difficulties, particularly for tree regeneration.
- Government guidance is required on how the venison market can be allowed to recover quickly

- Scottish Forestry sees increased browsing impacts on trees during Lockdown as a short-term issue and will not be seeking to recover grants. Estates should let them know about difficulties undertaking HIAs
- Missing seasonal surveys, e.g. breeding birds, could delay woodland creation schemes by a year. Restrictions on ecological fieldwork are more stringent in Scotland, than in England.
- Peatland restoration projects may also be significantly delayed.
- Land managers need to plan for the end of Lockdown as there may be a surge in visitor numbers which will need careful management at a time when there may well be reduced resources.