

Cairngorms Nature Strategy Group Meeting Mar Lodge on 28th October 2014

Present: Andy Wells (SLE & CNSG Chair)
Pete Mayhew (RSPB)
Anne Elliot (SNH)
Thomas MacDonell (Wildland Ltd)
Shaila Rao (NTS)
Nick Mardell (Community Development Officer)
Mark Bilsby (RDT)
Will Boyd-Wallis (CNPA)
Andy Ford (CNPA)
David Hetherington (CNPA)

Apologies: Ian Wilson (NFUS)
Giles Brockman (FCS)
George MacDonald (SGA)

1. Welcome & Apologies and Minutes of last meeting

AW welcomed everyone and introduced himself as the new chair of CNSG following Martin Price's departure. The Strategy group accepted a vote of thanks for Martin's efforts as Chair in getting the Partnership up and running. The content of the minutes was agreed and signed off. A number of action points from these and previous minutes remain outstanding and AW asked that these were listed in future minutes.

Action Point 1: Outstanding actions from previous minutes to be included in future minutes.

WBW reported on the Raptor Working Group meeting which took place on October 3rd, resulting in some discussion on: including the latest thinking within teaching modules at college gamekeeping courses; and the need to ensure raptor initiatives are not focused purely on 'easy-win' positive estates. AW advised that the raptor discussion should largely be taken forward by the Raptor Working Group.

2. Cairngorms Nature Action Plan report

Woodlands: AF reported on afforestation progress using planting data supplied by FCS. TM questioned the ambition of the 5000ha target for 2018 given the size of the CNP, stating that the majority of the 2014 total was achieved by Wildland Ltd through a single planting scheme. Discussion ensued on how to measure expansion through natural regeneration which is occurring widely around the CNP, and also planting occurring without public grant. DH explained he had gathered that type of information spatially from speaking directly with estates, but added that some may have been missed and that the area had not been quantified in hectares and added to the FCS totals. It is much more difficult to ascribe natural regeneration to a particular year than planting. With montane scrub in particular it is unclear what the baseline of its extent was or is, against which to measure progress.

WBW gave a quick update on progress with the Capercaillie Framework. The report and maps from first phase of the capercaillie framework have been discussed by the project board. The report will go to CNPA board in December.

More detailed reporting, broken down to specific projects, is required for future Action Plan reports. Reporting should indicate both status and trend and use simple categories to aid interpretation. It was acknowledged that meeting papers are public documents and that reporting status should reflect the sometimes sensitive nature of data.

Action Point 2: CN team to provide greater detail in subsequent Action Plan reports.

Wetlands/Wet grasslands: AE gave a presentation on a partnership-led project (including rush topping, scrape creation etc.) to restore wet grasslands in Badenoch & Strathspey to benefit farmland waders. TM raised the point that abandonment was a key issue for maintaining farmland in good condition for waders and also that the Strathspey Wetlands & Waders Initiative could consider expanding its reach to work with more landowners. It is important to ensure that hedges and woodlands are not created on, or near to, good wet grasslands, as this diminishes their wader interest. She is keen that the project's approach is expanded to other parts of the CNP. MB said there is a need for good advice on how and where to plant trees, with wet grasslands and waders in mind. The spatial targeting approach needs to take these into consideration.

4. Spatial Planning

DH gave a presentation of several GIS maps which aimed to identify priority areas for woodland expansion in the CNP. Several of these were compiled for the Capercaillie Framework and consequently focused on that species, which is nonetheless a useful 'umbrella species' for native pinewood expansion in particular. Other ecological considerations were: allowing other woodland species with fragmented distributions to disperse and recolonise; strengthening north-south migration routes for climate change adaptation; and riparian woodland creation primarily to benefit rivers and their biodiversity, but also helping strengthen woodland habitat networks across open ground between catchments. He also presented maps showing two potential constraints on woodland expansion, i.e. estates' deer density aspirations and Natura designations. He closed by indicating potential landscape-scale connections between woodland areas in the CNP which could deliver benefits for a wide range of species, including capercaillie, crested tit, wildcat, salmon and freshwater pearl mussel.

MB and PM felt the maps were very useful and inspiring and ought to be used when communicating woodland expansion with landowners and others. PM said that waders should also be a modelled constraint. He also felt that a similar spatial process could explore raptors and grouse moor management. Several species were mentioned as potential variables for assessing optimal expansion areas including black grouse and red squirrel.

It was agreed that the maps should be used in a variety of formats to sell the concept and vision of woodland expansion.

Action Point 3: CN team to follow up with a paper to CNPA board for agreement on woodland expansion in the NP.

3. Local delivery

NM gave a round-up of a community engagement approach for CN. TM questioned the representative and democratic nature of some community groups, and in particular the way they can influence how funding is spent in an area. AW feels that local delivery of/and involvement in the CN Action Plan is a key strategic area for the group to consider and should be the subject of more detailed discussion at a future meeting.

Action point 4: NM and AW to present item on local delivery at next CNSG

5. Review of Cairngorms Nature Strategy Group

AW proposed that given the change of Chair and the progress in the delivery of the Action Plan to date that there was an opportunity to review the terms of reference of the group to ensure that increased momentum and partnership working was focused in the right areas towards delivery of the targets/actions in the plan.

PM agreed that after 2 years there was a need for taking stock of CN. TM felt that access takers need to be represented on the steering group and suggested the Ramblers Association of Scotland. AF reported that the LOAF was the representative body for access takers and that this is one of the key stakeholders that needs to be identified in a stakeholder engagement plan.

Action Point 5: AF and AW to present an item to take stock and review the terms of reference for the CN Group at the next meeting. Group members are invited to forward comments in advance.

6. AOCB and Date of Next Meeting

No further business. Doodle poll to be sent round for a date in February.

Action Point 6: AF to circulate a doodle poll.