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## CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

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### FOR DISCUSSION & INFORMATION

**Title: EAST CAIRNGORMS MOORLAND PARTNERSHIP**

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#### **Purpose**

This paper reviews the progress of the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership (ECMP) to date, as well as considering its future development.

#### **Recommendation**

**The Board is asked to:**

- a) note the progress of the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership and;**
- b) consider its future development.**

## EAST CAIRNGORMS MOORLAND PARTNERSHIP – FOR DISCUSSION & INFORMATION

### Strategic Context

1. The East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership (ECMP) was set up in 2015 to become the focus for a landscape-scale collaboration between CNPA and 6 large sporting estates. The estates are Balmoral, Glenavon, Glenlivet, Invercauld, Mar and Mar Lodge, which together cover 138,000 ha, about 30% of the Park.
2. The ECMP aims to deliver public benefits alongside private interests through “sustainable moorland management”. The Partnership is a fundamental element of the first (Supporting landscape-scale collaboration) and third (Moorland management) conservation priorities of the National Park Partnership Plan. In addition, ECMP objectives around peatland restoration, woodland expansion and priority species conservation are important components of the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan. These objectives are also key responses to the Climate Emergency declared by Scottish Government and contribute to CNPA’s response to the Biodiversity Crisis.

### Achievements to Date

3. Moorland management should enable moorland vegetation communities and species of conservation value to persist alongside those of sporting interest. ECMP has been taking stock of the current situation, in order to identify where to focus efforts and to measure improvements. This has included monitoring of mountain hares, moorland raptors and wader breeding productivity, as well as identifying and quantifying areas of degraded peatland, areas of moorland that should not be burnt and areas of existing and potential woodland expansion.
4. Within the ECMP, **woodland** currently accounts for about 10% of the land area. Woodland cover has increased by around 1,500 ha during the past 10 years, and a further 2,000-3,000 ha of woodland expansion is currently committed to. Much of this will be by natural regeneration but some planting is also planned. In addition, approximately 1,000 ha of low density woodland and lone trees have recently been identified within ECMP from aerial images.
5. By the end of 2018, **peatland** restoration work had been carried out on nearly 700 ha of degraded peatland on ECMP estates, which corresponds to an estimated saving of 8,667 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. During 2019, five projects, on four estates (Mar, Invercauld, Mar Lodge & Balmoral), covering 267 ha were awarded funding from Peatland Action but a lack of contractor capacity meant that only two projects started

and winter weather has prevented the completion of both of these. All five projects are being carried forward and new projects will be developed with Glenavon, Balmoral (Delnadamph) and Glenlivet estates.

6. **Muirburn**, carried out in line with best practice, can improve habitat for grouse and other species such as mountain hare, however, if carried out badly, it can have significantly adverse effects on the environment. ECMP keepers and CNPA staff met for a joint muirburn training and discussion day in March 2019 and ECMP has been applying the Muirburn Code to identify and map areas that are inappropriate for burning. This exercise has been useful for highlighting areas of dry, degraded bog habitat that may be difficult to recognise on the ground as deep peat, as well as steep slopes over 27 degrees. Ground in either of these categories should not be burnt. Around a third of the 88,000 ha of moorland is currently under rotational muirburn across ECMP. This figure may be revised as maps of peat depth improve.
7. Breeding **wader** populations across Britain, and indeed Europe, have declined markedly in recent decades. However, areas of moorland managed for grouse shooting and adjacent rough pasture have been identified as persisting strongholds for waders, due to factors including predator control and limited agricultural intensification. Together with British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), ECMP estates have been monitoring wader populations and breeding productivity in order to better understand the causes of breeding failure on kept ground. Over 2 years, estate staff have carried out transects at 33 sites and found and monitored 183 wader nests using nest temperature loggers and wildlife cameras. Of these nests, 54% of Lapwing, 65% of Oystercatcher and 75% of Curlew hatched successfully. Just under half of all nest failures were due to predation, while abandonment/ poor weather accounted for a third of failures and agricultural operations and livestock caused the remaining quarter of failures. Contrary to previous studies, no significant effect of proximity to woodland cover on nest success was found.
8. Scottish Parliament has recently voted to afford the **mountain hare** protected species status, although this will only come into effect following consultation. It is likely that a licensing system will be introduced so having good year to year information on hare populations will be essential. In order to improve data collection, SNH has published a recommended protocol for mountain hare monitoring and GWCT has been rolling this out, particularly on grouse moors. Following training by GWCT, ECMP keepers surveyed 10 sites covering a total area of 40 sq. km in 2018, increasing to 14 sites (56 sq. km) in 2019/20. Counting at night with lamps or thermal imaging equipment, an average of 16 hares per km were encountered in 2018 and 11 per km

in 2019/20. These figures compare favourably with those published by SNH<sup>1</sup> and other Scottish sites counted using the same methodology. The decline in numbers between years is in line with expectation from the cyclic nature of mountain hare populations.

9. **Raptor** monitoring is being carried out in collaboration with Raptor Study Groups, estate staff and consultants. This suggests a baseline of around 50 pairs of 'moorland raptors' (golden eagle, peregrine, hen harrier and merlin) within ECMP. Nonetheless habitat and prey availability should support more. A big challenge for ECMP partners is to find ways of improving the conservation status of moorland raptors, along with other red and amber moorland bird species.

## Future Developments

10. Peatland restoration and woodland expansion are key responses to the Climate Emergency. The Peatland Action team are due to have greater control of their budget going forwards which will allow longer-term planning of projects. Partners are discussing a suitable target for the restoration of degraded peatland with ECMP, with a proposal of around 430 ha per year over the next 25 years. Methods of leveraging private investment into both woodland expansion and peatland restoration are also being explored.
11. Recent research has indicated the sort of levels of woodland expansion that are necessary for achieving net zero in the Cairngorms and this will need to be factored in to ongoing discussion with ECMP partners. The expansion of scrub habitats, a rare ecotone between woodland and moorland favouring juniper and willows (including rare montane species), is one way of achieving greater structural habitat diversity with a lower impact on grouse shooting and on wader habitat. Funding is being sought for two proposed projects. Riparian planting projects are also being undertaken by ECMP estates. These have the added benefit of providing much-needed shade for watercourses, in which summer water temperatures are compromising salmon, fresh water pearl mussels and other aquatic life. In addition, riparian trees enhance nutrient levels and benefit aquatic invertebrates, which in turn support juvenile salmon.
12. ECMP estates acting as an exemplar of good moorland management in the Park will be key to the partnership's future success. Discussion is ongoing with the partners as to how best practice can be taken forward within ECMP on issues such as muirburn, peatland restoration and greater habitat structural diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Newey, S., Fletcher, K., Potts, J. & Iason, G. 2018. Developing a counting methodology for mountain hares (*Lepus timidus*) in Scotland. Scottish Natural Heritage Research Report No. 1022

13. ECMP estates are continuing to monitor wader transects. Funding from SNH's Biodiversity Challenge Fund will enable wader habitat improvements to be made on 4 estates this autumn, focusing on cutting rushes and digging wader scrapes. The monitoring transects will provide a measure of the success of these habitat changes.

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