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24th Sept 2018

EAST LOCH SHIEL DMG HEALTH CHECK SUMMARY

The operation of ELSDMG was assessed on 21st Sept 2018, following discussion with DMG office bearers.

The Group has been quite difficult to assess properly in that part of the area contributes well and part of it does not. This is one of the clear priorities for the group to deal with going forwards.

Strong Points

ELS DMG is a well defined area and very self contained, bounded by lochs on three sides and by the boundary with Morvern DMG on the other. It is a relatively small group with a stable ownership structure.

The group has good administrative capacity. Membership is strong, although effective participation is poor from several, including some key properties. (See below).

The DMG has developed a sound basis for defining sub areas, but these are not yet properly endorsed, and there is a risk of the Group splitting if this is not handled properly.

The different roles/ functions of a DMG are well delegated, and the DMG have produced their own plan. The Western sub area requires a leader who can focus attention to actions in that area.

Finances are well run, if informally. The DMG should keep the need for budgeting under review if obligations increase in the future.

The group have an effective DMP, which sets out well the background to deer management in the area, provides good analysis, and uses population modelling. However, it is not yet signed off, or endorsed by several members, and it lacks a short, simple action plan. (See over). It still lacks proper consideration of designated sites.

The Group have been using population modelling well in analysing what is going on within the group, and to set out a number of different scenarios going forward. The strongest proposals for dealing with a range of issues and lowering the overall deer density have arisen out of population modelling.

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The 14 X areas of public interest have been set out and considered systematically in the DMP.

The DMG have no sika deer, and have a firm policy not to allow them to become resident within the area.

Communications within the area are generally very good, and the draft DMP and Group minutes are now online.

Training standards within the group are very good, and there is a detailed training audit in place.

While the terrain makes it extremely difficult to count deer, the DMG did pay for their own helicopter count in 2016, so a strong ethos is in place. Recruitment counting and population modelling in subsequent years gives them a high degree of confidence re current populations. FES have undertaken dung counting in the past and developed good occupancy information from this, although the information is now out of date, and the DMG have no recent analysis on woodland numbers.

The group do have a focus on an open ground target density (10.1 per sq km), but it is difficult to judge how this might affect a range of public interest outcomes, and a final DMP has not been fully endorsed yet.

All venison within the area is collected by one game dealer, and, although only two properties are SQWV accredited, this does account for 77 percent of venison.

Roles within the DMG are well delegated, but the West Sub- area require a leader to co-ordinate activity in that area.

At 7000 ha, past planting efforts within the DMG have been very high, and the current woodland cover at 35% is one of the highest in the Highlands. Potential woodland planting of up to 700 ha is likely going forwards, but these are not likely to be singular large areas in the initial 5 years or so, and more likely to be multiple small 10-30 ha blocks intended to extend the areas of designated and non-designated woodlands.

Group members have a good understanding of their woodland designated sites, and a history of pro-active management, although these areas are now perceived to be the biggest public interest issue within the area.

There are few DVCs within the area. Awareness of Chronic Wasting Disease and Lyme's Disease is strong, with both clients and members reminded of these on a regular basis.

There are few if any recreational conflicts within the area. Messaging is very positive, and several members use HTTSH.

The DMP contains good detail on income generated by deer and employment levels. The ownership and management structure is very stable.

While educational opportunities are constrained within the area due to its remoteness, a number of properties provide regular placement opportunities for students, and Conaglen Estate have hosted the Native Woods Discussion Group/ Native Pinewood Managers Group in recent years.

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Weak points

There are a number of key weaknesses/ problems within the area which need to be addressed as a matter of priority.

The most obvious example of this is that the relationship between the DMG and agency staff is very strained. The public sector owned properties are making little contribution to the DMP process, and the relationship with SNH personnel is poor. It is not for this report to apportion blame, but this situation unquestionably exists, and there is no doubt that this is making effective deer management more difficult than it ought to be.

From the DMG side; while the group is right to be assertive in outlining their analysis and preferred way forward, the tone used is almost certainly too aggressive in places.

From the agency side, it appears that the case for Section 7 intervention is being developed before any evidence from designated sites is available. It is also clear that the 2016 assessment process was much too harsh for this group, with many elements being marked down with little justification, or very high expectations set which do not apply to other groups. All this suggests a poor working relationship with fault on both sides.

The Group have set out a clear rationale for having a new Western sub area, but that area needs leadership to co-ordinate actions and make it work. There is a risk that the group will split, but this will not help the key issue at the heart of the group, namely the significant emigration from the open hill area to the woodland dominated area in the west. The DMP, as presented, does not include meaningful data from the west, although they have sought to provide some analysis of that situation with the data available to them.

The DMP itself sets out a great deal of useful background information, and the analysis within this is very good, pointing to likely solutions. However, the DMP is not yet endorsed, it is not clear what actions will be taken re designated sites, and there is no obvious commitment from properties in the west to running a different sub group there. A lot of work has been put in to developing a DMP, now on its 9th edition, with an extensive Action Plan.

The DMP lacks a short Action Plan for use at meetings, one that concentrates on the priority actions only for dealing with those difficult issues at the heart of the group.

The DMP could usefully include some better maps to highlight important detail. It is understood this is currently in hand.

While the DMP does have a target density for the open ground under current circumstances, it is not clear yet what that density should be to achieve the full range of public interest outcome.

2-3 DMG members have been participating in HIA, but this has not been a key focus for the Group, and they did not apply for the £1800 SNH grant to develop a plan during 2018. Blanket bog coverage appears not to be significant within the area, meaning that a suitable HIA plan would actually be very straightforward and easy to implement across the area. When looking at adjacent DMG areas, the likelihood is that the majority of impacts to open ground habitats will be low- medium in this area. Having data to illustrate this would significantly strengthen the Group's overall position.

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Designated sites are likely to be the key issue going forwards within this DMG. Of the five main sites, the one large blanket bog site is in favourable condition. The Ardgour Pinewoods are also in Favourable condition and have had a great deal of pro- active management over 40 years, but results are currently awaited from 2018 SCM monitoring. The Sunart SSSI/ SAC and Loch Shiel SSSI/ SAC are very large sites covering multiple designated features, and extending over four and two DMG areas respectively, not just this particular DMG. The remaining site is a small woodland site next to a loch where oak regeneration is proving difficult. The nature, locations and extent of these sites will make them difficult to address, and some designated features may well be mutually exclusive in their requirements.

Finally, the NWSS native woodland data suggests that the ELS DMG area is one of the poorer performing areas in the country, with only 46% of impacts recorded at low or medium impact. However, the DMP does show a lot of analysis, and in doing this, the DMG are ahead of many other areas. A full updated report has yet to be finalized, but it is this analysis of the current situation that is the expectation for spring 2019. From the information presented in report, it appears that the condition of 250-300 ha should have improved since the time of NWSS survey.

Summary

While there are some very significant issues within this group which may well lead to SNH intervention if not addressed, there is no doubt that the 2016 assessment was conducted very harshly. The improvement in Public Interest in particular has been by far the largest of any DMG area. While this may be due in part to the additional analysis and documentation provided since 2016, many of the elements were inappropriately marked at the time.

The focus of any intervention going forwards is likely to be the designated sites. The Group members have a very good understanding of these, and it is very important that they study carefully the SCM reports and data which are likely to be available shortly. It appears that the DMG members have the capacity to do this effectively. In particular, the two large SSSI/ SAC sites cover multiple DMG areas, and it is important that information gathered within ELS DMG area can be examined separately. On both these sites and the Doire Donn, the designated feature in Unfavourable condition is oak woodland, and such sites are notoriously difficult in Scotland. For the native pinewoods, it is important that deer impacts are cross referenced with the age profile of the areas sampled. Allowing some deer access to the more resilient parts of these sites is important in ensuring wider deer welfare within the area, and this should not adversely affect thicket or pole stage Scots Pine.

The DMP makes a very strong case for a strategic deer fence across the DMG area, effectively spitting off the proposed western sub area. While the purpose of fences can very often be to maintain a high population on one side of the fence, that is not the case here. The DMP argues and evidences via analysis that the open ground deer density could be very significantly reduced (From 10.1- 6.6) if it was not for deer lost via emigration to the west. Open ground properties have offered to share the cost of maintenance/ repair/ replacement of the existing fence, but it is not possible to do this when the fence is often up to 1000 metres inside the legal FES ownership boundary. Much of the proposed fenceline is already in place, with an estimated £150,000 required to complete the fence, perhaps shared between FES and a number of other properties.

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While such an action may not always be practicable, it does appear to be possible within this area, with the cost being in proportion to the likely improvements that could be achieved, namely, a significant reduction in deer number in the east, which may well go some way towards helping designated sites, and a significant reduction in immigration in to the west. Again, this should reduce impacts on restock sites and make it easier to address the areas of designated sites within the woodland.

It would appear than all the different elements of a workable plan are possible within the area, but they need to be drawn together. The necessary STRUCTURE needs to be in place, but working relationships are poor. If intervention is judged to be necessary, it should be focused on achieving this structure. A lead is required in the proposed western sub area. There may well be a need for an independent land agent to negotiate an agreement over any fence line. The open hill properties already lease some of the area outwith the fence on a year to year basis. In a successful negotiation, this should be extended to provide greater certainty of overall outcome.

As a matter of priority, the DMG need to produce a short, sharp Action Plan that can be discussed in meetings. Given the issues re designated sites/ sub- areas/ possible intervention, it is important to concentrate on and prioritize matters relating to this. All other issues, including HIA and NWSS are secondary to this, and this is a legitimate approach to take in the circumstances. Secondary issues must not distract from priority issues.

Upgrading the DMP maps as suggested will make the DMP much easier to understand and envisage. The DMG should continue with population modelling which is the core functioning of the group, and this should inform options going forwards.

It is very important that the Group holds together, and all efforts should be guided to that end, but there needs to be more effective input from FES, SNH as a landowner and the SGRPID owned properties in order to make this happen. Using government intervention against land owning government agencies would not look good. The fences associated with very significant woodland expansion in the past are now breaking down and leading to current problems. Fixing these is likely to be the most cost effective means of dealing with a range of issues, and generating a level of confidence within group members.

The issues needing to be resolved within this area are workable and proportionate if better working relationships can be achieved. Splitting the DMG in to separate areas will not deal with the core issue.

My instinct is that the DMG should ask for help from SNH in putting a better structure in place to deal with current issues. The requirement for this is likely to be short lived if a strategic fence can be delivered and if one of the public agencies can provide leadership within the proposed western sub area.

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