

Minutes of the East Loch Shiel Deer Management Group Meeting held at the Conaglen House on 19 April 2022

Present:

Steve Fox (Chairman)(Carnoch)
David Mosgrove (Vice-Chair)(Conaglen)
John Guthrie (Conaglen)
Ross Maclean (Conaglen)
David Mackenzie (Conaglen – Glenscaddie & Gour)
Patrick Cook (Conaglen)
John Jackson (FLS – Glenhurich etc)
Harvey Phillips (Inversanda)
Rory Sinclair (Resipole)
Jim Jackson (Resipole)
Ross Dunsmore (SGRPID - Sunart Estate)
Sinclair Coghill (NS - Claish Moss)
John MacDonald (WHV)

Apologies:

Ewen Maclean (Secretary)(Ardgour & Glenscaddie),
Robin Maclean (Ardgour), Shaun Corrigan (Ardgour) & Peter Sinclair (Resipole).

The meeting was asked and agreed with a voice recording being made to help with the preparation of the minutes.

1. Chairman's Welcome and Apologies

- Steve Fox welcomed the group to the meeting and introductions were made.

2. AGM for Voting Members held in relation to Nominations or Volunteers for the Chairmans role.

- There were no volunteers or nominations made for the Chairman position, as such Steve Fox's offer to continue in the role was unanimously agreed, as were reappointing the Vice Chair and Secretary positions.
- There was no other AGM business proposed, so this part of the meeting was closed.

3. Chairman's opening remarks

- SF thanked the members for attending and handed out agendas for the meeting.
- SF confirmed that due to COVID this was the first in-person meeting held for 2 years and he commended members for staying active and keeping the DMG business ongoing through the pandemic.
- These comments of appreciation were returned by the members for SF's tireless involvement in the process during this period.
- SF noted that it was an achievement that ELSDMG appeared to have managed to preserve all the Jobs of the resident deer managers and support staff throughout this period.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

- During the previous 2 year period of the pandemic, no physical meetings took place and it was noted that the ELSDMG members corresponded with the Chairman on many subjects by e-mail, telephone and that a series of Agenda and Progress Reports were circulated for comments by members.

With no matters arising from the 'Agenda and Progress to October 2021' this was adopted in lieu of the formal meeting.

5. Estate Reports

a. 2021/22 season cull.

	Stags	Hinds	Calves	Others
Carnoch (North)	14	12	5	
Claish Moss	9	12	4	
Conaglen	46	99	48 (TBC)	
Glenscaddle (BPL Lease)	22	24	6	2 Roe Doe
Glen Gour (BPL Lease)	10			
Inversanda	6	7	2	
Resipole	14	9	2	
Sunart Estate	10	14	4	

JJ(FLS) reported that he had e-mailed the FLS cull figures to the Chairman.

b. Condition reports.

- Round robin reporting on condition of deer culled and observed during the past stag season and recent winter period took place.
- Generally all parties felt the stags had been in good condition and as normal hinds started to show slightly poor condition by January 2022.
- Members agreed that the winter was mild and spring grass appeared to have come early, so natural mortality should remain very low over the Winter 2022/23 period.
- It was reported that during the 2021 stag season there was again a shortage of mature stags over the Eastern sporting areas, but perhaps not as bad as the 2020 season.

c. Changes in land management objectives.

- No changes in Land Management Objectives were reported by members.
- JJ (FLS) reported that one wild boar had been spotted near Polloch and DMack confirmed that he culled one wild boar in Glenscaddle in April 2020.

d. HIA, shelter and forage availability.

- SF confirmed that the current HIA log is published on the ADMG website.
- SC confirmed that SNH completed the HIAs at Claish Moss in August 2021 and the general results found were low impacts on the peat flats and slightly higher impacts on the hill ground.
- RD queried how often the HIA's need to be repeated on Sunart Estate and SF confirmed every 3-5 years was normal.
- SF referred to a telecon from SC in December 2021 at which SC raised the issue of ELS not meeting HIA targets. SF requested a copy of the HIA targets SC was referring to.

e. Poaching and DVC's.

- No party reported any observed or suspected poaching activities during the previous period, which was agreed was understandable as venison prices had fallen dramatically due to Covid.
- No DVCs were reported.

f. Designated sites.

- JMacD reported that he has been asked by SNH to cull out of season on the Claish Moss area, due to a small amount of deer ingress from the adjacent woodland area through the porous fence.
- DM provided a summary on the creation of new woodland enclosures within the Ardgour Pinewoods and Doire Donn designated sites on Conaglen. Conaglen are focusing on woodland expansion
 - DM confirmed that Conaglen are focusing on woodland expansion at this time and continuing to utilise the system of rotational fencing which they have used for the past 30-40 years.
 - As such six new enclosures totalling approximately 200ha (500 acres) have been fenced since Jan 2022 or will be fenced before March 2023 and a number of older enclosures will be opened to provide additional shelter etc.

- iii. Three new enclosures are located in the Ardour Pinewoods SSSI/SAC and two will be opened in that area.
- iv. Three new enclosures are located in the Doire Donn SSSI and one will be opened in that area.
- v. Approximately 60ha of woodland planting is scheduled to take place in these enclosures and a large portion of the remaining 140ha is expected to benefit from natural regeneration along with providing protection of existing woodland areas inside the enclosures.
- vi. SC suggested that Nature Scot would like to see more areas protected and DM confirmed that there was a rolling plan for future periods which FCS and NS have previously reviewed as part of the ELS Cooperation Woodland Feasibility Application which was completed in 2020/21.

6. Deer Count

- SC confirmed that a NS Helicopter count was completed on 25 February 2022 and presented count maps to the members.
- SC confirmed that 3 Helicopters were used during the counting and all open ground was very successfully covered, however it was reported that the weather changed somewhat by the afternoon and when the areas inside the FLS fence at Glen Hurich were being counted.
- SF queried if NS could confirm why this helicopter count was completed only 3 years after the previous NS Helicopter count of the ELSDMG area and why NS did you not accept the figures in the ELSDMG Population Model which were proven to very accurate when counted in 2016, 2019 and again in 2022?
- SC suggested in response it was in relation to concerns over deer numbers in the DMG area and that ELSDMG was still on NS's concerns list.
- SF requested SC to provide a copy of the risk assessment for this count.
- The 2022 Deer Count numbers confirmed 9 deer/km² being 3,836 deer in total over 44,513ha. (Comprising 1,107 stags, 2,047 hinds and 682 calves).
- It was noted that the above total number of 3,836 deer was approximately 800 less than those counted in the 2019 SNH count. (The exact numbers counted in 2019 were 4,579 deer: comprising 1,349 stags, 2,424 hinds and 806 calves).
- Members commented that they suspected the numbers population numbers would have reduced over this 3-year period and SF commented that the number counted in 2022 were almost identical to those forecast in the ELSDMG population model.
- SC suggested that based on the high Hind to Stag ratio that ELSDMG members should aim to reduce the hind numbers in the group quite significantly and that based on research from Rum etc that the group should then see a better performing population capable of rearing a higher percentage of calves to maturity and in turn the number of mature stags would increase over time and less stags would migrate into the adjacent FLS woodland blocks.
 - Members were somewhat sceptical of this suggestion with worries that migration would continue as long as fences were porous and that it would be difficult to increase the overall deer numbers again if they were reduced.
 - RMacL suggested the biggest effect on the ELS deer population was the general wet weather conditions and that a wet winter would likely cause the same loss problem if the hind numbers were lower or kept as they are today and with lower numbers breeding number it would take longer for the population as a whole to recover from bad Winters.
 - DM suggested that with 9 deer/km² and new woodland enclosures in the designated areas that the group was already addressing the previous NS concerns.

7. Recruitment and mortality counts

- SF reminded members that they should report Recruitment and Mortality figures to SF for inclusion into the population model.
 - It was however agreed that open range Mortality was likely to have been very low due to the mild winter, so SF was to use a low figure, perhaps 2% in 2022 population model update.
 - RMacL and DMack confirmed they would be doing recruitment counts in May and would let SF know the figures.

8. FLS Update and Population Assessment Report

- JJ confirmed FLS had received a Population Assessment Report, which suggested significantly higher hefted deer numbers were present within the FLS woodlands than previously reported. JJ also confirmed that due to Covid there were some delays to the completion of required assessment tasks and therefore there are some reliability issues with the new population information.
- JJ confirmed that in some locations FLS would be increasing efforts to achieve an increased cull, but generally they were likely to target a similar number of animals in the Glen Hurich woodlands as they have done in previous years.
- DM confirmed the only concern from the adjacent sporting members of the ELSDMG is movement of deer from the hill areas and culling directly adjacent to the unsecure fence line boundaries.
- JJ confirmed that FLS were spending much more time on specifically focusing on improving habitats and addressing Scot Gov targets particularly on designated land.
- JJ confirmed that FLS understood that a more secure fence line would be better for all parties, but that FLS were not currently willing to pay for that fence on their own.
- In relation to specific locations JJ confirmed that the Loch Shiel/Callop area designated sites would be discussed further with Conaglen. Also, that Achenellan Woodland would be harvested soon, so a new road would be installed and future matters e.g. access etc. will be discussed with Resipole in due course.

9. Proposed Culls

- To be agreed/confirmed in good time for the season, after Recruitment figures have been added to the population model, but generally to be in line with previous years culls.

10. Non-toxic ammunition.

- SF reported that most Game Dealers no longer reported that they were willing to accept lead shot carcasses.
- RMacL confirmed that he has discussed the matter with Highland Game, who suggested to him that lead ammunition would be accepted for one more season, but they were encouraging suppliers to move to non-lead ammunition as soon as possible.
- The difficulties arise with using stocks of lead ammunition, non-toxic ammo supply issues, calibre issues, all of which are exacerbated by guests bringing their own rifles and ammo.

11. Update Training Log.

- SF asked if there were any identified training needs, none were suggested.
- SF asked for members to let him know of any required additions/alterations to be incorporate into the ELSDMD's training record.

12. Update from NatureScot.

- SF referred to a telecon from SC in December 2021 at which SC raised the issue of a potential S7 and asked if this was no longer on the NS agenda? No response was offered.
- SC provided an update on topics from NS
 - SC highlighted the focus on climate emergency, which is high up within the SNH priorities and that he suspected the scale and pace of things around deer management would increase in the future.
 - NS are moving away from the number of deer/km² method and are now putting more emphasis on deer numbers in line with Habitat Targets rather than per km².
 - NS board will very much be focusing on pretention of biodiversity losses by 2030 and targeting delivering biodiversity improvements by 2045.
 - The NS Wild Deer National Approach Document is currently being reviewed.
 - NS are trialing Deer Counting using drones with cameras and also with fixed wing airplanes using much higher definition cameras than previously available.

13. Stakeholders and Public comments.

- No other stakeholders or public comments were received either in advance of or during the meeting.

14. AOB.

- Next meeting suggested to take place in circa Nov/Dec 2022 and likely to be held in Ardgour Village Hall.
- No other business.