**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**South Sub area meeting**

**11 am**

**Crask Inn**

**Thursday 11th August 2022**

**MINUTES**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Crask Inn. The purpose of the meeting was to get a focus on the NWS South Group, particularly in relation to the Cnoc an Alaskie SSSI, but also to get acquainted with any other issues in the area.

*Present: Tom Chetwynd (NWS Chair), Victor Clements (NWS Facilitator), Chris Fletcher, Clovis Fletcher & Derrick Sutherland (Shinness Estate), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), Charles Worsley (Fiag), Annette Parrott (West Shinness), Tom Cameron & Megan Bregazzi (FLS), Holly Deary & Steve Wheatley (Nature Scot.*

*In attendance: Ben Harrower, Wildlife Drone Consultancy.*

1. **Apologies**

There were no apologies, all properties being represented.

1. **Nature Scot take on current situation**

*SSSI Monitoring 2018*

SNH had monitored the Cnoc an Alaskie SSSI in 2018, and determined that the part of the site on Shinness Estate was in Unfavourable condition due to tracking. That part of the site on Altnaharra did not show the same problem.

*Other relevant information*

Deer counts in the area always showed low numbers, but there may well be a contribution from sheep and/ or cattle. The issue is on Nature Scot radar, but at the moment, they are content to work through the DMG and develop understanding os the problem, and hopefully then derive a solution.

*Future planned work?*

Nature Scot will be looking to re-check the site within 5 years, with work pencilled in for 2025 at the moment.

1. **Property feedback**

*Shinness*

Shinness were the largest property in the South sub area, but they had very few red deer resident. During the spring they can get large numbers of travelling deer which are very mobile. The landscape is very flat and open, making stalking very difficult, and the logistics of getting to areas of the ground are not easy. Shinness think that some of the tracking damage will be due to sheep and/ or cattle, as that is one of the few areas of the property to have a current agricultural interest. The highest point on the property is less than 1000 ft.

Looking forwards, Shinness are interested in putting in a riparian planting scheme along the River Tirry, and are consulting with a range of organizations about that at the moment. Providing better habitat for salmon is a major objective.

Shinness have significant numbers of sika deer in a range of woodland plantings.

*West Shinness*

Detached from the SSSI issue, West Shinness lies alongside Loch Shin. There are very few red deer using the ground, but there is a significant resident population of sika. The estate carry out a maintenance cull each year to control numbers.

*Fiag*

Fiag have a large conifer plantation on part of their ground, as well as an area of open hill. The property would like to reduce the size of the 900 ha plantation, restore some felled areas to peatland habitat, and convert the rest gradually towards a more native structure. The plantation is composed mostly of Lodgepole Pine, with a proportion of spruce. Much of the area is either in check, or is windblown. In recent years, Scottish Forestry have been reluctant to allow removal of the poorer areas, and this has effectively blocked any development of the area. However, they are now much more willing to consider removal of forest area, and this has opened up possibilities now for restructuring. This could now begin to happen quite quickly.

As with Shinness, Fiag would like to re-instate riparian woodland along the River Fiag to improve salmon habitat. The two rivers are relatively close together.

There are both red and sika deer using the plantation area, so restructuring will need an accompanying deer management plan. The stalking is currently leased, but that contract ends in 6 years. It is possible that deer dependent on the plantation are also impacting the SSSI.

*Altnaharra*

The SSSI on Altnaharra does not show the same tracking damage. Altnaharra are very aware of deer movements and changing patterns of usage within the wider area. Culls to the north have changed deer distribution and behaviour. The estate have good capacity for blanket bog monitoring. They have looked at riparian planting in Glen Vagastie in the past, but too much of the river is close to the designated area, and fences would also block deer movement in the landscape.

*FLS*

FLS Dalchork lies outwith the NWS area, but is obviously a very significant neighbour to the east. It is one of the largest conifer areas in the north of the country, with a significant internal sika deer population. Management priorities in recent years have been to restructure the plantation by extensive felling, and much of the cleared area is being restored to peatland habitat. Deer control within the area is obviously very important. It is thought that the western boundary fence is now fairly porous in some sections, and that their deer population is therefore interconnected with the rest of the NWS area. It may be that this boundary fence is removed as it deteriorates, there being relatively little deer pressure from the west, certainly from red deer. There is a modest red deer cull within Dalchork as well. The current contractor is familiar with other areas within NWS DMG.

1. **Deer analysis**

*Red deer*

There were relatively few red deer within the area, but there was considerable movement from adjacent properties. The red deer population on Ben Hee (Merkland) had been reduced very significantly due to big culls to the north. However, there had been little activity on Loch Choire to the east and numbers were likely to have been building there now. Understanding the wider deer situation was important for this area.

*Sika deer*

Sika were by far the most significant species locally, with relatively high populations in most woodland areas, and these are seemingly interconnected. Occasional travelling animals are culled to the north and west, but it is felt that sika are contained relatively well in this area.

At present, certainly on the private estates, it is extremely difficult to know what the approx. population might be, and it could possibly be an order of magnitude more than currently understood.

*Monitoring*

To better understand the dynamics within the South sub area, we need to monitor both habitats and deer. Deer are covered in following section.

In terms of habitats, blanket bog dominates the area, beyond the designated sites as well. The DMG are trying to increase monitoring capacity for monitoring this at the moment. Success in 2021 was only partial, and we are looking for more plots in 2022. The objective is to ensure that member properties are confident in their ability to monitor what is going on, and that agency staff have faith in results that come back. A certain amount of flexibility is required in relation to location, so it could be for example, that a larger proportion of plots are placed within the SSSI in future years.

Collated HIA results will be circulated this autumn.

*Drone counting- discussion on application in sub area*

There was a short presentation by Ben Harrower on drone counting for deer, and we discussed the application of such technology to this sub area.

Clovis Fletcher will co-ordinate local discussions about what an appropriate survey might look like for this autumn, and whether it should be repeated in the spring. The count (s) can then be reviewed to plan an ongoing schedule going forwards. A demonstration the evening before on Shinness had revealed a lot of sika deer in a relatively small plantation, and after the meeting, the drone very quickly found some roe deer far out on the bog. In general, people were enthused about the potential of the technology, and what it could do for our understanding of the situation in this part of the DMG.

*2022-23 culls*

Cull targets were discussed briefly for coming season, and will be distributed to all in due course. These may change subject to any drone survey this autumn.

1. **AOCB**

TC gave the group an account of the situation in Strathnaver at the moment, where there was now agreement to the sheep stock club organizing a contractor to remove hefted deer from the part of the strath which they wanted to deer fence. There were good lines of communication now, and a significant reduction cull is being planned.

There are additional NWS meetings next week, at Achfary on the 16th in relation to the Foinaven SSSI/ SAC area, and in Tongue on the 17th for a site visit to Wildland properties.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next NWS DMG meeting will be on 17th November, 2pm at Lairg Community Centre.