**Morvern DMG – Autumn meeting, 5 November 2024, 2pm Lochaline Hub – Draft Minutes**

In attendance at Lochaline Hub: Peter Lawson (Chair) & Antony Groenen (Kinlochteacuis and Killundine), Kevin Masson (Kingairloch), Izzy Baker (RSPB Glencripesdale), Neil Roberts & Arron Roberts (Laudale), William Hawes (Ardtornish), John Jackson (Forestry and Land Scotland), Derek Lewis & John MacDonald (Drimnin & JAME), Matt Wilson (Oronsay), Tom Turnbull (ADMG), Ian Collier (Scottish Forestry), Clara Montgomery (Morvern Community Council), Ellen Bird (Saving Morvern’s Rainforest), Tom Edwards (Treasurer & Secretary, minutes).

by MS Teams: Michael Skelly (Glensanda), Sarah Proctor (Scottish Wildlife Trust), Gaetan Hannecart (Kingairloch), Andrew MacMaster (NatureScot), Professor Tony Martin (Waterlife Recovery Trust, item 15 only).

1. Chairman's welcome & any apologies

Apologies: Steve Fox (Vice-chair, Carnoch)

Morvern DMG has developed a broader focus. The Chair asked for views on whether the group should explicitly recognise this. It was agreed that future meetings should have two sections; one to consider wider land management; and one on deer management.

**AGM**

1. Accounts and 2025 subscriptions

Tom Edwards had circulated a paper prior to the meeting presenting the Group’s accounts; projecting planned expenditure for the remainder of 2024 and for 2025; and proposing subscriptions for 2025 to cover this planned expenditure.

The Accounts and proposed subscriptions for 2025 were adopted, proposed Derek Lewis, Seconded William Hawes.

1. Dates for 2025 Meetings

The group agreed 22 April and 28 October 2025 as the dates for its next spring and autumn meetings.

**DMG meeting**

1. Minutes of April 2024 meeting and matters arising

Actions from the minutes of the meeting of 2 April 2024 were reviewed. On wildfire response - Rhian Evans of the Fire Service would be happy to meet with DMG members and has provided a template for recording key information about wildfire preparedness.

**Action: Tom Edwards to circulate this template and collate responses. All: Responses by 22 November please.**

The draft minutes were agreed, proposed by Izzy Baker and seconded by William Hawes.

1. DMG cull return for 2023/24 to ADMG

A table with the Group’s cull for 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 by sub-Group and landholding was circulated prior to the meeting.

**Action: any updates to these figures to be sent to Tom Edwards by 22 November.**

1. Individual Landholding Reports – see table at end

Additional information: William Hawes updated the meeting on Ardtornish’ deer management plans going forward. Ardtornish carried out a foot count in March 2024 and found a density of 4 deer per km2. Ardtornish also carried out a drone count using thermal imagery in May 2024 which found a density 8.5 per km2. Both counts showed a preponderance of stags to hinds. A new population model was commissioned from Rory Putnam from the results of the drone count. This presented scenarios to bring deer numbers down to 250 stags and 250 hinds over 3 to 5 years. Ardtornish is increasing its stag cull from 30 stags to 130, and will continue to cull at this level over the next few years, with a broadly even split between NW and SE. Ardtornish will carry out drone counts annually and culls may be adjusted depending on the results. Ultimately, habitat response and not numbers is key for Ardtornish.

1. Deer Management Plan and open range cull plan

The Group’s Deer Management Plan (DMP) ran to 2020. The Group is working to a cull plan which runs to spring 2026, as agreed with NatureScot. Work on a revised cull plan and DMP should begin in 2025, but this will need to be informed by a count. The Group’s next DMP should be dynamic and as well as population modelling, cull plans should take account of new data, e.g. on HIA impacts, and be adjusted according to what they show.

**Action: A sub-group of members to be established to meet with NatureScot to look at content of future DMPs.**

1. Deer Count

A count is needed to inform the next DMP. The possibility of a drone count was discussed. Members would like to know if a drone count of the whole DMG is feasible, the cost, when the count could be done. It was agreed to explore whether NatureScot could support the cost of a whole group thermal drone count, and the Group would then decide whether to go ahead. If it is not possible to have a drone count, the Group will organise a foot count in Spring 2025. It was agreed to explore whether NatureScot could support the cost of a whole group thermal drone count, and the Group would then decide whether to go ahead. If it is not possible to have a drone count, the Group will organise a foot count in Spring 2025.

**Action: NatureScot to report back to the Group as to whether a drone count of the whole Group area can be supported. The sub-Group established to consider the Group’s cull plan and DMP to report back to the Group with a recommendation for how to achieve a group-wide count in 2025.**

1. HIA 2024 and 2025

Heath was monitored in April 2024, and plots established in 2020 were re-surveyed. Glensanda are monitoring both heath and blanket bog in 2025 and will share the results with the Group, when the 2024 report will be updated. Two assessment methods were used: the Best Practice (BP) method which uses two indicators (one of grazing/browsing and one of trampling), and the MacDonald et. al method which uses a total of 8 indicators (4 grazing, 3 trampling, 1 dunging). The latter approach is recommended because it uses more indicators and so can get an impact level for all plots as the BP indicators, esp of trampling (stem-breakage) are often not applicable.

The assessment using the BP indicators found median grazing impacts were high in the NE Sub-group, moderate in the SE and W Sub-groups and high for the Group as a whole. Trampling impacts were moderate/low in all sub-groups and for the Group as a whole. Comparing the assessments for the sub-sample of plots surveyed in both 2020 and 2024 in the same locations found grazing impacts were high in the NE Sub-group in 2024, compared to moderate in 2020; and moderate in the W and SE Sub-groups and for the group as a whole in 2020 and 2024. Trampling impacts were best compared for the group as a whole and were moderate/low in both 2020 and 2024.

Using the Macdonald et. al indicators, grazing impacts in 2024 were high in the NE; high/moderate in SE; and moderate in the W Sub-groups and high overall. Trampling impacts were low in the SE, and moderate/low in NE and W Sub-groups and for the group overall. Dunging impacts were moderate. Combining all the indicators with equal weighting showed median overall current impacts were moderate in all sub-groups and overall.

Additional plots were assessed at Ardtornish to give a sample of 30 heath plots. This assessment using the MacDonald et. al indicators found median grazing impacts were high/moderate; trampling impacts were moderate/low, and dunging and overall impacts were moderate. Compared to the previous assessment in 2017, grazing impacts had reduced slightly from high to high/moderate; dunging impacts had increased from moderate/low to moderate; and trampling and overall impacts remained moderate.

Discussing these results it was noted that heath is limited in extent in large parts of Morvern and is a habitat favoured by deer especially in winter. In such areas heath will show higher impacts at lower densities than in other areas with higher densities where heath is more extensive. Heath is less-susceptible to trampling than e.g. blanket bog, especially where it is fragmented and can be browsed without deer trampling it. It was also noted that deer are not the only large herbivore in Morvern, and the report includes a map summarising which herbivores are present in different areas.

A question was what the impact levels mean for the future of the habitat? Macdonald et. al suggest how heaths will respond over the long-term at different impact levels. In summary, high browsing can result in low or substantially declining dwarf shrub cover in <10 years; moderate browsing can possibly result in low or declining cover but over >10 years; whilst low grazing results in the unrestricted expression of the growth potential of dwarf shrubs.

The DMG set targets for impacts on heath and blanket bog in 2019, which it aims to reach by 2025.  The targets are for 70% of plots to show a low or moderate impact, and <30% of plots to show a high impact. These targets were to be assessed using the Best Practice HIA method. The 2024 assessment has shown that for heath, 58% of plots showed a low or moderate grazing impact, and for those plots where trampling could be assessed, the impact was low or moderate for 88% of plots. Using the MacDonald et. al method overall median current impacts (grazing, trampling, and dunging impacts combined) were low, moderate/low or moderate for 64% of plots, which is close to the Group’s target.

For 2025, there will be repeat monitoring of blanket bog plots monitored in 2021.

NatureScot carried out monitoring of the Morvern Woods SAC in 2024. The report with the results is not yet available.

**Actions: Tom Edwards to share the 2024 HIA report with NatureScot, and arrange for it to be posted on the Group's website; and NatureScot to share the results/report of the monitoring of Morvern Woods SAC with the Group.**

1. Native woodland creation & Green finance

The Group has had no further contact from the Palladium/Hampden consortium re: green finance for native woodland creation.

1. ADMG Update

The Chair welcomed Tom Turnbull, Chair of ADMG who gave an update to the meeting. ADMG is continuing to work closely with the Scottish Government and NatureScot as new legislation on deer is developed as part of a forthcoming Natural Environment Bill. ADMG continues to have concerns about the new proposal for Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (DMNROs) and in particular the lack of clarity around what the trigger for a DMNRO would be, and how they will be implemented. The legislation is expected to be published around the turn of the year and considered by the Scottish Parliament next year. Three pilot schemes have been launched in 2024 to incentivise culling[[1]](#footnote-1) which offer payments for additional culls above recent averages. The ADMG continues its work in developing the Common Ground Forum.[[2]](#footnote-2) Scottish Quality Wild Venison and Scottish Venison are merging and Scottish Venison’s budget for promoting venison has increased five-fold. NatureScot is carrying out a review of species licensing.[[3]](#footnote-3) NatureScot has published an [online questionnaire](https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=wChAB2XhmUmZrTFgOtc7rKdUSWKgLOhPplGAbdx2zBhURU9JWDVZNzBFV0swT1NRMVJVNTFYSTdXSy4u&route=shorturl) to seek feedback from stakeholders. Morvern DMG members commented that the questionnaire is very leading in the questions it asks. ADMG will hold a Regional Meeting on the 14 January 2025 at 5pm by Zoom[[4]](#footnote-4), and its AGM will be held at Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness on Wednesday 19 March 2025.

1. Agency updates
   1. NatureScot

Discussions at this meeting show how group members are responding to deer impacts. Population models don’t have to follow a five year timeframe, and should be adjusted dynamically. There needs to be clarity on whether the species licensing review includes deer authorisations.

**Action: Andrew MacMaster to confirm whether the species licensing review includes deer authorisations.**

* 1. Forestry and Land Scotland

Plant health orders continue to require felling which is ongoing. Otherwise, felling and restocking continue in accordance with long term forest management plans. Access at Loch Arienas is currently closed.

* 1. Scottish Forestry

Funding remains available for Forestry Grant Schemes. It is good to see proposals coming forward from Morvern for woodland creation and re: designated woodlands.

1. Game Dealer Collections

Members reported recent experiences with game dealer collections.

1. Saving Morvern’s Rainforest Update

Now in the first year of a five year delivery phase, the project has gone from 1 person (Ellen), to employing seven people, with the recruitment of a team of four to work on rhododendron clearance, a tree nursery manager, and a rainforest advisor. Rhododendron clearance has begun on Ardtornish. The Tree nursery will be able to supply local provenance trees in 1-2 years time. A short film highlighting the work of project is on Youtube.[[5]](#footnote-5) Alasdair Firth has been employed as rainforest advisor and can assist DMG members with advice on management and woodland creation. Ellen is looking for landowners to volunteer to join a landowner steering group which would meet every 6 months or so..

**Actions: Ellen Bird to send Tom Edwards further details of the Landowner** **Steering Group and the support Alasdair Firth can offer.** **Tom Edwards to circulate.**

1. Mink Eradication - Proposed Operational Plan from Waterlife Recovery Trust – Q&A

Professor Tony Martin from the Waterlife Recovery Trust has begun work on an operational plan to eradicate mink from Morvern. The Trust is fundraising to support the project. The next step is the appointment of a local project manager to work in Morvern, whose key initial task would be to develop a detailed operational plan. There would be consultation with all Morvern’s land managers as part of this.

**Action: Tony Martin to update the group as the project develops.**

1. AOB

Police Scotland have suggested their [online form](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=1f148e6d96e4652eJmltdHM9MTczMDE2MDAwMCZpZ3VpZD0yZTIwYmRhMi1mNmU4LTY1MWUtMTM1MS1hZWY3ZjdkMzY0N2YmaW5zaWQ9NTIzMQ&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=2e20bda2-f6e8-651e-1351-aef7f7d3647f&psq=police+scotland+contact+us+form&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuc2NvdGxhbmQucG9saWNlLnVrL3NlY3VyZWZvcm1zL2NvbnRhY3Qv&ntb=1) could provide a more convenient means to notify the Police about night shooting instead of calling 101. Other than Kingairloch and Oronsay, group members either already have or plan to apply for night shooting authorisations. Each night shooting outing should be reported to the Police, and the authorisation also requires a dog to track any wounded deer.

A local place plan is coming out. To note that this would include local landscape areas and there is a proposal to extend these to cover coast between Drimnin and Lochaline.

Several members noted recent problems of gates into exclosures being left open, including gates over tracks and deer gates, as well as pedestrian gates, and there have also been instances of fences being cut.

**Actions: Tom Edwards to circulate link to the Police Scotland form. Clara Montgomery to raise at the Community Council the importance of closing gates in deer fenced exclosures.**

Tom Edwards

20 November 2024

**Landholding reports**

|  | **Stags 2024** | **Condition** | **Poaching** | **HIA** | **Proposed hinds 2024/25** | **Woodland / peatland / conservation / other land use** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ardtornish | 82 stags to date, 21 in W and 61 in E. |  | None |  | Reducing hind cull to 90-100. |  |
| Carnoch | 17 | Generally excellent. Rut finished early. | None noted | Repeat of plots surveyed in 2014 and 2017 on open range found impacts similar or slightly lower. Also undertook training in WHIA Lite. | 20-25 plus followers (subject to variation required by population model) | Peatland restoration under consideration |
| Drimnin | 7 from hill ground, 9 from inbye, 1 from enclosed woodland | Very good. Some of best heads from time in Morvern. | None |  | 25 from open hill but may be double this with deer from inbye and woodlands. | Working on nature restoration programme. Will include some planting on non-SSSI ground. |
| JAME Forest Partnership | 24 | Excellent. | None |  | Six hinds and 3 calves taken OOS. |  |
| FLS | 86 to date, preponderance of young stags |  | None | No. Will have undertaken. | 40 - 50 | Felling and restock programme ongoing. No peatland restoration planned, but could change following felling in some areas |
| Glencripesdale | 10 outwith enclosures. Will shoot more through winter. |  |  |  | 20 |  |
| Glensanda | 11 stags | Good. Plentiful mature stags. | None. | Planned for 2025  Limited browsing noted on transects on heath on low ground | 20 hinds plus followers, but this may increase depending on deer seen on ground | Native woodland planted in March/April. Wet weather helped with establishment, and good regen within enclosed areas. |
| Killundine | 20 | Good | None |  | 30-40 | Fence excludes deer from Killundine gorge and area above the road now complete. Objective to exclude deer from this area. |
| Kinlochteacuis | 10 |  |  |  | ~10 |  |
| Kingairloch | N – 30  S – 20, 2 from enclosed woodland | Excellent. Weights fell off after 7 Oct  Abundance of mature and old stags. | None | Browing impacts on North, neighbouring tenant has sheep which stray onto KGL | Last year hind cull was increased by 20%  75 planned dependent on deer seen on ground | 3 riparian plantings planned.  Plans for peatland restoration including culling targeted around proposed area. May be too small to get funded, would be keen to speak to others |
| Laudale | 38 total, 18 E and 20 W | Good condition.  Weights were down, average age up. Weight due to shooting more stags in the final week. Planning to shoot more stags through the winter on the W, within designated site. Perhaps around 10 stags. |  |  | 70 minimum. | Enclosing 45ha of SSSI, completed by end March. Will impact deer movement. E difficult to fence. Low impact zone on E side. Enclosures on W side will see deer move into places not previously. Manage through night shooting. |
| Rahoy hills | 4 |  |  |  | Increasing cull from 15 to 20 plus followers. | Core objective to continue to protect oak woodland and arctic alpines. Keen to revisit peatland restoration plans which had been put on hold. Still w/o reserve manager. |
| RSPB Glencripesdale | Drone count came in at double foot count.  Initially fencing in next FY, then increasing culls, responding to impacts. Difficulties with access and extraction |  |  | Medium impacts in woodland |  | Looking to identify potential for peatland restoration on open ground. |
| Rhemore croft | Between 1 April and 31 October 1 stag and 1 calf. |  |  |  |  |  |
| Oronsay | 0 there are v few on the island. Recent counts of 12 to 13 hinds plus followers with imager. | Good | None |  | May cull ~2 hinds depending on owner’s wishes. | Rhodie clearance under Saving Morvern’s Rainforest to begin late 2024/ early 2025 |
| Be’Ach, Clounlaid, Crosben | 15 |  |  |  | 30 plus calves |  |

1. <https://www.nature.scot/deer-cull-incentive-schemes-launch-help-tackle-nature-and-climate-crises> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://thecommongroundforum.scot/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.nature.scot/doc/species-licensing-review-terms-reference> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Register your interest in attending by e mailing [clare.irving@bidwells.co.uk](mailto:clare.irving@bidwells.co.uk) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRMSmx1bw5k> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)