

Sunart Rainforest Meeting , Sunart Centre, Strontian 1st April 2025

Attending

Duncan Henderson (2 Ardery) – attended via video link. Joint owner with brother John Angus Henderson (not in attendance)
Colin Campbell (Ardery), Kate Campbell (Ardery)
Mary Paton (SGRPID), Ross Dunsmore (SGRPID)
Calum Strong (FLS)
Peter Sinclair (Resipol), Rory Sinclair (Resipol)
Laura Sutherland (Ranachan), Paulo Berardelli (Ranachan)
Malcolm Gillespie (Bunallteachan)
Rachel McKerral (NatureScot), Andrew McMaster (NatureScot)
Diane (Dee) Baum (Woodland Trust Scotland)
James Hilder (SCC Director) Jamie McIntyre (SCC Volunteer)
Bruce Taylor (Brambletree)
Eleanor Garty (Brambletree/Eleanor Garty Associates)

Apologies: John Angus Henderson (Ardery) and Mike Loginov (Camas a' Choirce), Nick Brooks (SCC)

1. Introductions

JH explained that this was the first meeting to bring together those landowners involved in the North Sunart Woodland Owners group, specifically those who participated in the recent Woodland Cooperation Project – delivered by Brambletree Management.

2. SCC & Background

JH & BT explained that NatureScot were pleased with the report and had encouraged partners to apply for Restoration Funding, Brambletree Management had given a great deal of pro-bono time to developing the bid and in November had asked the Sunart Community Company (SCC) to act as lead partner, as a designated community charity, with appropriate systems in place to manage and audit grant funding. (Previous experience of running large projects – hydro, Oakwood, Jetty etc and now as of August 2024 owners of the Longrigg Woodland, purchased from FLS.

Although not officially announced, it looks like the project will be awarded funding so this early meeting was to plan next steps, gather consents for survey work to be undertaken and also to secure match funding commitments from key partners, which will unlock the £100k+ to undertake the work.

3. NRF Application & Timings

BT explained the scope of the project which is to gather evidence of deer numbers and impact, and non-native species for all land from Strontian to Salen and north to the shores of Loch Shiel. The 2025 survey work to be undertaken on foot and by drone in

2025 will result in Woodland Management Plans for each owner, who after the project ends, can take these to apply for implementation funding in 2026. Ideally a joined-up/coordinated approach will be more effective in restoring biodiversity in the long term.

Drone survey for deer count is urgent due to trees coming in to leaf.

A key issue is the 'end of effective life' of the former "strategic deer fence" which is now porous.

JH explained that SCC will require a Working Group to be established, reporting to and advising the SCC Board of Directors. Ideally at least one Director from SCC will participate on the Working Group. JH is taking that role but hopes to step back once the project is up and running.

Part of the funding allows for the community to employ a part time Sunart Rainforest Project Officer to help coordinate this committee, and with assistance from Brambletree Management liaise with and coordinate subcontractors on the ground, linking with landowners.

The meeting agreed that the project name would be the **Sunart Rainforest Project**.

4. Deer Management Discussion

PB - carries out deer control on Ardnastanaig, Ranachan, Camusaine (and one other property?) Cull Feb 23-Feb 24, 200 deer within the existing strategic deer fence. Cull Feb 24- Feb 25 was similar. Still many deer on the hill, mainly red, some roe, no sika.

PS - deer density on Ben Resipole has been 7-8/100ha in recent years.

JMcI - the previous fence was Millenium and LIFE funded, with minimal financial commitment from landowners.

Discussion followed around fencing/no-fencing question:

AMcM - govt. drive to landscape scale restoration. Recovery of habitats on the hill provides alternative forage.

PS & RS - fencing will be necessary to ensure success of any initiative.

BT - govt target is 10 deer/ 100ha on open hill and 2 deer/ 100ha in woodland; mismatch between hill and woodland objectives.

CS noted that low deer numbers on 1-2 on the hill can potentially permit tree regeneration, but it is a long game.

5. FLS land

CS - Sunart holding are well on the way to restoration; last conifer blocks will be removed in next 5 years. £100k is earmarked for rhodo and exotic conifer removal in the current year.

Felling on the Achnafearn side will start within the next 5-10 years. Current thinking is restoration to 100% native woodland. The existing fence is porous and there is poor access for deer management. FLS is on board with landscape scale deer management but CS questioned whether private landowners can buy in to this. If there is insufficient buy-in, FLS will fence.

6. Land value and income discussion

PB - Ranachan is registered organic and biodiversity uplift is now becoming important, as well as food production.

PS - Ben Resipol is unsuitable for tree planting and its value derives from sporting. A reduction of deer numbers = loss of value; will compensation be paid?

7. Project funding and outputs discussion

JS - difficulties of cobbling together a visionary approach using piecemeal grant schemes which do not necessarily fit. Ideally funding would be for the natural heritage designation.

MG - the project needs to link strategic and local requirements and be appropriately funded. It can't be a case of 'do this' without financial compensation for losses. PR that was delivered for the previous Sunart project needs to be revived.

PB - local availability of venison should be a core principle, with the community involved in bringing deer off the hill, giving away venison for free.

JH - the final project report needs to have political resonance - i.e. if a well-evidenced case can be made perhaps the funding regime could be influenced.

RD - currently just need commitment from all to explore options.

PB - potential opportunities for the project to work with corporates for Biodiversity net Gain (BNG) funding.

CS - for BNG need stability and a functional partnership. Agreement of strategic direction at the end of the development project will make delivery more fundable.

DB - potential to look at what other communities are doing in this area, e.g. Knoydart, Knapdale.

8. Operational Issues

CC - Asked for detail of operations proposed before signing the consent form.

PS - already carrying out own habitat assessments.

RD - SGRPID also doing own habitat assessments, which will be fed into the project.

CS - concern about cost of drone survey vs. budget. BT - based on quotes received.

DB - some projects are buying thermal drones and doing their own surveys.

JMcI – potentially local drone operators could engage with appointed contractor to gain experience/training.

AMcM – an ambition could be to have 2 full-time deer controllers with capacity to carry out thermal drone surveys and Woodland Herbivore Impact Assessments.

9. Match funding

JH – SCC could contribute up to £5k as community contribution on behalf of private local landowners & crofters if this was required as last brick in the wall of funding. JH acknowledged offer of funding from the Woodland Trust which makes up the balance.

CS – FLS contribution will come from Scot Gov allocation towards rainforest restoration.

RD – SGRPID can provide a match funding letter.

In-kind Deer Management

Unclear what evidence is required by funders.

CS – can provide FLS data

RD – could DMG provide cull figures for private ownerships? Owners already submit returns to DMG.

AMcM – Deer control on Claish Moss is carried out by a contractor, small numbers only.

10. MoU

JH – will look at drafting a Memorandum of Understanding for the group. NSWOG is still extant and can be one member of the group. SCC uses a 'standard Terms of Reference which should cover most requirements of a MOU.

The Group will need a Chair and Vice Chair. Treasurership – by default provided by SCC as lead body.

11. DONM

30th April 10.30am. Venue tbc.