

Sunart Rainforest Meeting, Unconfirmed Note Acharacle Community Centre 30th April 2025

Attending: Rory Sinclair (Resipol) Jim Jackson (Resipol) Paulo Berardelli (Ranachan) Malcolm Gillespie (Bunallteachan) Euan Campbell (Ardery 1 - East) John MacDonald - Deer management – SGRPD / Claish Moss Miller Harris Andrew McMaster (NatureScot) James Hilder (SCC Director) Craig Holden – SCC Longrigg Woodland Coordinator Bruce Taylor (Brambletree) David Mosgrove (for East Loch Shiel Management Group – (DMG) & Conaglen Estate) Ross MacLean (Conaglen Estate) Neil Roberts (Laudale Estate)	Attending via Video Link (Teams) Eleanor Garty (Brambletree Mgt) Duncan Henderson (Ardery 2 - West) Ross Dunsmore (SGRPID) Mike Loginov (Camas a' Choirce), Apologies: Mary Paton (SGRPID) Rachel McKerral (NatureScot) J. MacIntyre (Longrigg Woodland) Diane Baum (Woodland Trust)
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1. Introductions

All present introduced themselves.

JH explained that this was the second meeting to bring together those landowners involved in the North Sunart Woodland Owners group. The aim is to formalise the group to help the SCC oversee the project. SCC remain legally responsible for audit of the £100k+ from NatureScot and match funders.

2. Notes of Last Meeting & Funding Update

JH and BT updated the meeting on progress since the last meeting – notably that NatureScot had finally given the grant go ahead on 17th April. Match funding letters have been received from FLS, SGRPID and Woodland Trust. This means we can officially launch.

DM (on behalf of DMG) raised concerns that

- The Deer Management Group had not been invited to the 1st April meeting
- The project area seemed to have expanded (blue line on project map) beyond the area covered in the 2023/24 collaboration project – without due consultation
- The community company could now be perceived as effectively acting as an agent for NatureScot who had a stated agenda to drastically reduce deer numbers that would threaten livelihoods and potentially impact the local economy. (DMG estimates 50 people employed in deer stalking and related sectors locally)

This prompted a widespread discussion with the following points raised:

- a) Invitations had been sent for the 1st April meeting on the basis of known land ownership contacts – not umbrella groups. Some of those attending the 1st April were DMG members – there was no attempt to exclude.
- b) The proposals to explore funding possibilities for a wider area were included in the slide show given in Resipole Barn in August 2024 so a continuation project was discussed openly. Nature Scot had subsequently indicated that the outlined “wider area project” may well be eligible for funding and so Brambletree Mgt had pulled together the project on behalf of NOSWOG. On realising that the group were unconstituted, the Sunart Community Company (now owners of Longrigg) agreed to ‘house the project’ in order to give the project the best chance of funding success. The 1st April meeting had been called by SCC in the interests of communicating the “positivity” from the Nature Restoration Fund – but with no green light.
- c) JH on behalf of SCC reiterated that the charity’s objects were about socio-economic regeneration – which meant supporting the economy as well as biodiversity. This project is about gathering data to make more informed decisions about managing the land within the project area. The DMG are welcome to contribute views and their own habitat and species data to the project.
- d) AM confirmed that Scottish Govt has a duty to improve the condition of designated areas and so all FLS and SGRPID lands are under scrutiny. Ideally this project will enable all parties to work on a jointly acceptable forward plan.

Deer Management

- e) There followed an exchange of views on the merits and costs of deer fencing to protect vulnerable areas, compared to perpetual culling. There was some discussion on deer densities reflecting a range of views.
- f) Use of fencing has not been excluded from project solutions. The porosity of the existing strategic deer fence is acknowledged. This project may unlock further funding especially if a funding bid is part of a coordinated approach.
- g) Reducing deer populations in a specific area arguably encourages inward migration from other areas.
- h) Ranachan has increased its annual cull but still perceives high deer numbers, which conflicts with owner’s desire to increase cattle density.
- i) Even with the existing strategic deer fence repaired deer will swim the loch.
- j) DMG already have a Management Plan which overlays much of the project area.

Action: DM will circulate

3. Draft Terms of Reference

- a) JH displayed a copy of a draft Terms of Reference on the screen – used for SCC sub committees.
- b) The committee will comprise invitees (such as neighbours e.g. Laudale), as well as representatives of each land holding. In the event that votes are taken – each landholding within the project area has one vote,
- c) Treasurership is undertaken by SCC, and Secretariat will be delivered by a new project coordinator yet to be appointed.
- d) The T.O.R. included Aims and objectives taken from the funding bid. The reference to improving the condition of the SSSI seemed to imply that the entire

project area may be treated as a rainforest area when clearly the open hill is not rainforest. Accordingly, the meeting agreed to amend the objectives of the project in the Terms of Reference to delineate the land which has a designation and that which does not.

Action: JH to circulate an edited list of Project Objectives (**See Appendix 1**)

4. Election of Office-bearers

As the other roles are fulfilled by SCC, JH sought nominations for a Chair and Vice Chair from those in attendance. None were forthcoming.

Action: JH to sound out NOSWOG members **and if anyone changes their mind** and wishes to step forward – to contact JH.

5. Drone Survey of Deer Population

JH and BT explained that three companies were invited but only one was ready and able to do a count in the timescale.

Subsequently Boddy Environmental had completed the task and the Report had arrived via email on the day of the meeting – this was subsequently shared on screen.

The Drone Survey showed interesting data, highlighting hinds and stags, plus other wildlife like Foxes and Roe deer.

The average density of the area was 10.65 deer per sq.km.,

DM confirmed this was similar to the density identified by the DMG of approx..10.35.

6. Project Management Consultants

JH had corresponded with NatureScot and following completion of a “Single Tender” Justification”, had secured their acceptance that it was not in the interests of the project to insist on a competitive re-tendering process. JH informed the group that the Board of Sunart Community Company had therefore formally proposed *Brambletree Management* as Project Consultants. The meeting confirmed this appointment.

7. Workplan – Immediate next Steps

The immediate urgency is to progress the Woodland Herbivore Impact Assessments before the seasonal re-growth takes hold.

BT is to finalise the tenders and circulate ASAP. Lots will be subdivided between open hill and woodland.

Action: BT

Some discussion of likely contractors and ecologists followed. Availability at short notice will be an issue.

JH explained that the SCC purchasing policy encourages “buy local” so in order to encourage Lochaber or Argyll based ecologists to apply an additional appeal will go out on social media.

Action JH

RD asked that we forward contact details of all interested parties to him as SGRPID require to undertake their own HIA as soon as possible.

Action BT / RD

Next steps thereafter will be tendering the remaining pieces of work and community engagement.

8. Publicity

Until Nature Scot release us from the press embargo, we cannot formally publicise. This can happen once new project officer is in post and a Chairperson elected.

In the meantime, we will proceed with advertising for local ecologists and the Rainforest Project Coordinator.

Part-Time Project Coordinator – JH shared a proposed Job Description for a part time worker. This would enable the Sunart Community Company to undertake all the necessary admin and audit of the project and provide a secretariat for the Working Group. They would also deliver the community engagement part of the project and help landowners and volunteers to undergo training in “Rapid Rainforest Assessment”

JH to issue the advert and promote on social media and Community Woodland Association network and undertake recruitment with members of the group and SCC Board.

Action: JH

9. Date of Future Meeting

Aim for Mid-June.

Action: JH

Dates thereafter to be agreed when new Project Coordinator is in post.

APPENDIX 1 – Project Outcomes as per Funding Application

Proposed Edits in: ***bold italics underlined***

1. Deer management

- a) A more accurate population count and assessment of deer movements in and out of the area.
- b) Population modelling for the whole area.
- c) Agreement on a protocol for collaborative deer management over the wider area that supports employment of qualified hunters and training of assistants to widen the skill base in deer management.
- d) Deer fence condition survey of northern plantations and assessment of feasibility of maintaining or replacing.
- e) Consideration of large-scale deer reduction to allow nature recovery over the whole area with or without deer fencing of woodland regeneration areas

2. SSSI Favourable condition – Habitat management plan

- a) As an outcome of the Forestry Cooperation Project, plan the actions required to achieve Favourable Condition ***of those areas of the SSSI within the project area***, within a 10-year period, particularly deer

reduction and INNS eradication. This will be in the format of a Nature Recovery Plan for the wider area, inclusive of open hill habitats, the native woodlands that comprise the Rainforest, and individual woodland management plans for private ownerships, **acknowledging that different approaches may be required for different habitats.**

3. Habitat assessment and monitoring

- a) Carry out Rapid Rainforest Assessments (RRA) to obtain key information for management planning to protect and enhance key temperate rainforest features, particularly lichens and bryophytes.
- b) To identify and quantify locations where rhododendron, Japanese knotweed and non-indigenous conifers threaten biodiversity over the wider area
- c) Detailed survey and mapping of the potential for expansion **of native woodland** by natural regeneration and new planting.
- d) Herbivore Impact Assessments of open hill and woodland habitats

4. Community Consultation

- a) Community consultation over the Development Phase 2025-2026 to inform local people and receive feedback.