



Camera trap image from 2012 survey ©WILDRCU/ SNH



Scottish Wildcat Forum – Summary Notes

28th April 2014, SNH Battleby

The first Wildcat Forum was held on 28th April at SNH Battleby and was attended by c. 50 people from partner organisations and those with a keen interest in wildcat conservation. The Forum sought to provide an update on progress since the launch of the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan in September 2013 and to provide a wider audience with an opportunity to input to this programme of work.

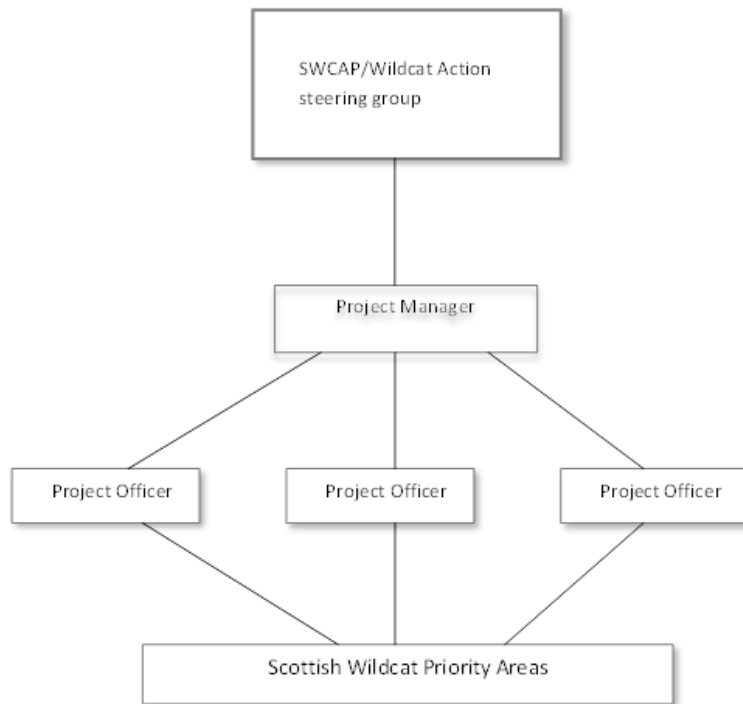
The afternoon consisted of 4 short presentations and then a panel discussion.

Eileen Stuart, SNH - Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan - launch and next steps – after quite a lengthy period of consultation and debate we now have an action plan that has been agreed, announced by the Minister for the Environment and we are now seeking to implement. Eileen reflected on the strength of the partnership approach and that we are very much looking for everyone to help deliver the action plan. The key elements of the plan were summarised. It was recognised that to the outsider there may have appeared to be a bit of a hiatus since the launch, but that a core Steering Group had been formed shortly after the launch and had been busy drawing up plans and funding applications to implement the action plan. The Forum seeks to update on this work. The intention to continue to use the Highland Tiger brand was announced as was well received and recognised during the Cairngorms Wildcat Project.

Fiona Strachan, HLF Wildcat Project Development Officer - Preparing for action – Fiona's role is to work with the range of partners to develop a funding application to the Heritage Lottery Fund to deliver some of the actions in the conservation action plan – these focus on actions that are aligned with HLF eligibility criteria and focus on but are not restricted to, the *in situ* actions. Together they are being termed 'Wildcat Action' as the HLF funded elements of the action plan need to have a separate identity. The Wildcat Action project will sit under the umbrella of the Highland Tiger brand alongside other elements of the work such as the captive-breeding programme. The governance of the overall action plan delivery was outlined, with the Steering Group taken from the wider body of partner organisations that make up the Partnership and the annual Wildcat Forum having a wider again representation of interested parties. In addition some 'task groups' have been set up to advise the Steering Group on particular topics. These have been led by a variety of organisations.

The focus of work in Wildcat Action is to reduce the risks to wildcats within priority areas, whether from hybridisation with feral cats and hybrids, from incidental persecution or

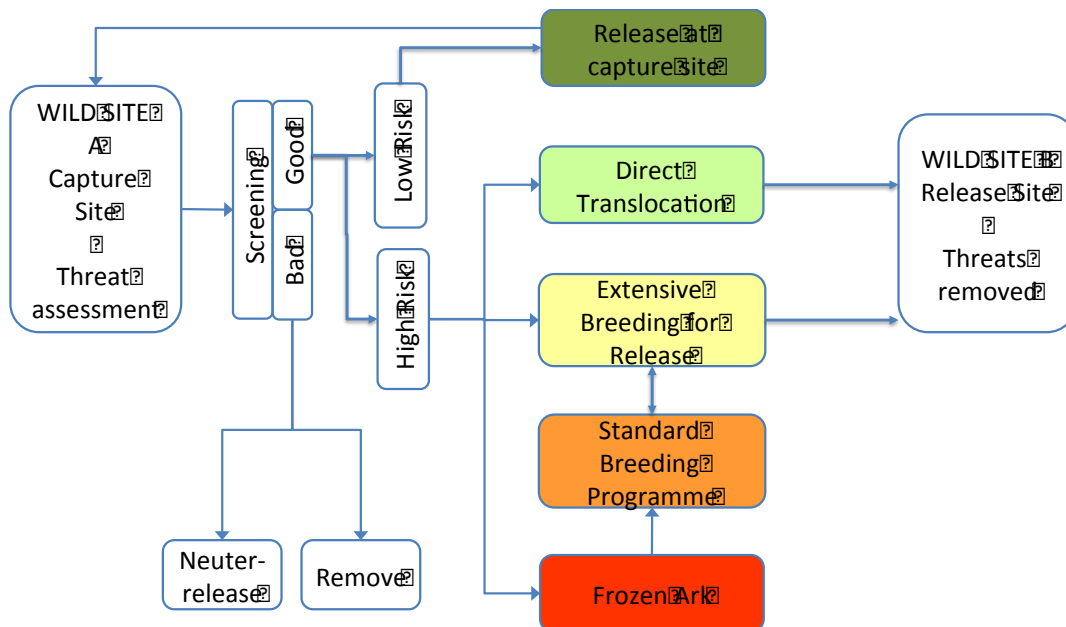
development pressures. Reflecting these risks, the Wildcat Action project proposes to employ Project Officers to work with local communities and land managers, to promote responsible cat ownership, co-ordinate a programme of trap-neuter and return of feral cats and integrate advice with land management training provision. Other actions will seek to involve land managers and volunteers in a programme of surveys of wildcats and other factors affecting their populations. A communications plan is being developed to tailor awareness raising and education to a range of audiences and will seek to address both the local level and the wider wildcat conservation messages. The proposed Wildcat Action project structure is as follows:



The Project manager will most likely be based in SNH as SNH is the lead partner in the HLF bid, but it is hoped the other posts will be out posed in other organisations.

At the Forum the aim was to submit an application to HLF in June, but this has since been moved to the end of August to provide a little more time to work with partners to develop and strengthen the application. Hence the project will not start in earnest until early 2015, but a lot of preparatory work is still needed and will be ongoing.

Roisin Campbell-Palmer, RZSS - Plans for a breeding for re-introduction programme – A meeting of the captive-breeding task group had been held in February at which most of the organisations with captive wildcat collections or with an interest in participating in a captive breeding programme, had been present. This work is being led by RZSS and the Aspinall Foundation. Roisin presented a model for a breeding programme which includes several parallel programmes; taking animals from different sources and with slightly different objectives; relating to the source of animals and the assessment of threats. The aim is to have animals for future release and hence the work to create safe places to release wildcats is essential. The model also involves a variety of enclosure designs and there has been some audit of what facilities are already available or are currently under construction.



The status of existing captive collections is currently being investigated, but most are believed to have a degree of hybridisation; in places are compounded by inbreeding. Hence it is assumed there will be a need to take wildcats from the wild to bring new individuals into the programme. It is proposed that a minimum of 30 individuals (over a period of time) are brought into captivity as founders to give the captive population long-term viability. Roisin highlighted this relates to the ongoing work to look at the status of wild-living wildcats.

It is proposed to manage the population according to EAZA (European Association of Zoos and Aquaria) breeding programme guidelines. Collections would need to agree the management guidelines as a condition of participation.

New quarantine facilities are being built at the Highland Wildlife Park and possibly also in the west by The Aspinall Foundation. Hence there are some key areas of work on the status of the current studbook and how this compares with animals in the wild, that need to be resolved ahead of making decisions regarding the new programme, but thereafter work should commence relatively quickly.

Jenny Bryce, SNH - Priority areas for wildcat conservation – the wildcat conservation action plan sets out the aim of identifying at least 5 areas as the focus for *in situ* wildcat conservation action with a view to stabilising these populations. Jenny summarised the work that has been carried out to scope and survey potential priority areas. This work has been carried out under contract by the James Hutton Institute, WildCRU – Oxford University, The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland in partnership with National Museums Scotland. The work is ongoing and the full report will be available later this summer.

Initial work sought to explore the size of a priority area that might be needed for a viable wildcat population. Using population modelling approaches a figure of 4000 ha of suitable wildcat habitat was derived. Survey areas that met these criteria were identified in each of the nine areas for which we have recent verified wildcat records. It is recognised that wildcats are likely to persist in other areas, but recent surveys have failed to produce any evidence, which suggests they may be at low densities in some of the other locations studies – hence the focus has been on where we have evidence of wildcats. In each of the nine

locations a programme of camera trapping (3 weeks) and collecting of genetic material (scats, hair or blood) was carried out. All cats observed on camera were scored according to the Kitchener *et al.* (2005) 20 pelage criteria and classified using the 7 key characteristics. In total 45 cats were observed over the 9 sites. Six sites had cats that met the 'relaxed' wildcat criteria and 5 sites with cats that met the 'strict' definition. These are viewed as promising results given the relatively short survey window. Most sites also had hybrids and or domestic cats present.

Work has also been carried out to screen the samples obtained during this work using molecular markers according to an indicative test. In addition samples recently sent to the National Museums Scotland were also included in the screening. The full results and interpretation of this work remain to be completed, but early indications suggest there wild-living cats have a spectrum of molecular markers with some tending towards a wildcat classification and others towards a domestic cat. The continuous variation is consistent with previous studies.

Another main thread of the scoping work was to get some local views on the desirability and feasibility of the area becoming a priority for wildcat conservation. There was a good response to questionnaires, providing lots of helpful information to guide the work going forward. Broadly there was support for wildcat conservation and individual actions, with a wide range of views on some issues and moderate levels of uncertainty; indicating a need to better explain the implications of an area becoming a wildcat priority area.

The information from various sources has then been synthesised and recommendations made for which areas would represent the best opportunities for working to benefit wildcats. Some indicative maps have been drawn up to indicate the areas of operation, i.e. what might make a sensible geographic unit and are somewhat wider than the survey areas.

The recommendations are not yet fixed, but six were presented as: Angus Glens, Strathbogie, Morvern, Strathpeffer, Dulnain and Strathavon. The results of this work will be communicated back to participating landowners and those providing samples for the genetics work. Comments on the recommendations were invited.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Questions raised – brigaded by subject matter and responses paraphrased.

Questionnaire responses had suggested that people were reluctant to stop feeding feral cats. Had this been identified as an issue in the CWP?

This had not been highlighted as a particular issue during the Cairngorms Project. Cats Protection noted they actively discourage volunteers from feeding when they are not trapping. They also advise members of the public against feeding, as unneutered cats taking advantage of the food will be healthier and thus more fertile and feeding can attract cats when there would otherwise not be a population (or it would at least be smaller).

What thresholds either genetic or morphological should be used and how do they relate to one another?

Is there a genetic test available?

Is there regional variation in wildcats that should be retained?

The wildcat definition that has been proposed for use in the field is a stripey tabby cat with a thick, black banded, blunt tipped tail. There will also be opportunities to employ a more considered assessment of individuals.

Previous work has indicated a broad correspondence between molecular markers and morphology.

As yet there is no definitive genetic test available. A number of researchers are carrying out work on genetics and taxonomy. The test used in the current work is an indicative test based on markers developed from studies on European wildcats.

It was suggested deciding on genetic thresholds is an important step for the captive breeding programme.

It was suggested that given small founder populations and the potential for inbreeding, that mixing of extant populations was likely to be a good thing.

The location of the proposed priority areas was questioned and why there was not more focus on the north and west where there are fewer people and presumably fewer feral cats.

Another commented it was difficult to believe there are not wildcat populations in other parts of the highlands. Was survey in other areas planned?

How do the proposed actions link to the work ongoing in Ardnamurchan?

Will the wildcat priority areas become formally designated in time?

It was explained that the process for identifying wildcat priority areas had necessarily focused on locations for which we have evidence of wildcats. There have been camera trapping studies across the wildcat range in the last 3 years, partly commissioned by SNH and partly carried out by Kerry Kilshaw for her PhD studies. This has included sites in the north and west, but no verified wildcat records were obtained for these areas. Survey coverage is not exhaustive and does not indicate that there are no wildcats in the areas where they were not found, but they may be at very low densities and hence have low

encounter rates. We felt we had to start somewhere and hence the focus on areas with verified records.

The Conservation Action Plan has an action to monitor national wildcat distributions and trends, hence this remains an aim. However, this work has not been included in the HLF Wildcat Action project which is focused on the priority areas. However, the protocols developed for these areas can be applied elsewhere and we would hope that volunteers and other organisations would play a part in carrying out this additional survey. NTS indicated they are surveying all their properties.

The scoping work had not included Ardnamurchan as work was ongoing there by other parties and we had sought to avoid duplication/ confusion about who was doing what.

It was commented that this should not preclude working in this area. This was noted.

Wildcat Priority Areas are intended to be entirely voluntary. There is not a mechanism for formally designating sites for wildcats as they are not on the appropriate schedule of the Habitats Regulations that would permit this. Also given they are a wide ranging species the concept of site designation is not considered appropriate for this species.

The presentation implied that bringing wildcats from elsewhere in Europe remains a possibility and one member was concerned about this given their recent investment in new wildcat enclosures.

How important is the size of breeding enclosures?

It had been discussed at the captive–breeding task group meeting that Scottish wildcats likely remained the preference, but once we knew more about the status of our wild populations we would be in a better position to decide where to source wildcats. Bringing cats from elsewhere remains a possibility, but would need to be properly investigated. Supplementation of captive –bred Scottish cats may be one option rather than an either or situation.

Larger enclosures are viewed as appropriate for animals taken from the wild, for developing wild behaviours including catching live prey and for better physical development of animals prior to release. Whereas smaller enclosures may be suitable for animals from captive sources.

If people continue to release domestic cats to the wild, the TNR programme will need to be ongoing, should we not advise Scottish Government on the need for more regulation relating to the keeping of domestic cats?

It is hoped that through the education and awareness programmes, attitudes towards domestic cat ownership and vaccination and neutering in particular, will change and the need for TNR will diminish over time. It was indicated that the current trend is for minimising regulation and that restrictions on cat ownership may be viewed as difficult to enforce.

One member reported increasing numbers of pine martens in recent years and asked if there was evidence of a competitive interaction with wildcats and if this was going to be looked at as part of the action plan.

Several species of predator including wildcats and pine martens are known to co-exist elsewhere in Europe. Although competition is possible, the panel were not aware of any evidence of this. Because of the experimental nature of such research, this is not planned as

part of the current programme of work. But that does not preclude others seeking to carry out a study.

Comments

It was reported that TNR has been operating successfully in Ardnamurchan.

It was suggested the focus of the *in situ* work was on feral cats, whereas we should also take the opportunity to learn more about the wildcat populations.

It was suggested dens with several kittens may provide the opportunity to remove wildcats for a captive breeding programme with less impact on a population than removing breeding adults.

Another reported having observed kittens being moved and hence the opportunity to remove kittens may be brief following discovery.

It was suggested that hybrids may provide a buffer between domestic cats and wildcats. Whereas others felt that hybridisation between wildcat and hybrids was more likely than between wildcat and domestic cats.

Feedback

There were some comments the Fourm needed to be longer and provide more opportunities for discussion and networking. This will be taken on board for the next one. The proposals are to have these meetings at least annually.