Forum, Thursday 28ᵗʰ May, Boat of Garten Community Hall

Summary notes:

1. Will Boyd Wallis - CNPA, gave a warm welcome and thanked everyone for attending. Will was pleased to be asked to Chair the day (in Eileen Stuart's absence) as Chair of the Cairngorms Wildcat Project has a new incarnation in the Scottish Wildcat Action (SWA) branding. He was pleased to see many of the partner organisations present and some new faces. The aim of the day is to update partners on progress with the action plan and to seek your input to some of the practical issues with delivery. Will welcomed the HLF Grant Award and introduced the new Scottish Wildcat Action project team, that this has helped to bring on board. Will welcomed the skills and experience of the new team and recognised the dedication of the Steering Group. He looked forward to a day of good discussion. Pete Cairns was thanked for attending and helping to build resources for SWA communications.

2. Jenny Bryce - **SNH** provided an overview of progress on the action plan. A lot has been happening involving lots of people since the launch in September 2013 and the Forum (in April) last year; much of it laying the foundations for the next 5 years of delivery. The plan content was briefly reviewed and the actions summarised – noting there are named leads, and will be SMART milestones and a delivery timetable for all the actions. The Steering Group involving representatives of (SNH, CNPA, RZSS, SGA, RDSVA, NMS, NTS, SWT, FCS) have oversight of the delivery of the action plan, but very much seeks to involve the wider partnership in the work.

There are a number ways by which the plan is being delivered: Principally the SWA – priority areas action and the SWA – conservation breeding programme; sitting outside of this are a few actions that will need wider input from others to deliver, e.g. Forestry Commissions' work to trial novel forest practice for wildcats and the input to a wider survey programme for wildcats.

Noting progress so far;
- six priority areas have been identified (see SNH Commissioned Report 768) and a lot of work went into the preparation of the Heritage Lottery Fund application. This included a detailed activity plan of what we plan to do, a detailed budget, a communications plan which sets out our target audiences and how we plan to engage with them, a management and maintenance plan that looks at the long-term goals and how the action will be maintained. Many partners contributed to expert task groups to develop protocols for the project. Hence were delighted to hear in December we had been awarded an HLF grant of 50% towards a total project costs of £1.95 m over 5 years. It was noted a significant element of the match funding is volunteer time that we hope to generate during the project. There is still a shortfall in the match funding for the HLF funding hence we will be continuing to fundraise.

- The conservation breeding programme (which others will update on) is underway and is funded by Scottish Government and RZSS; again additional funding will be required.

- An SRDP option for wildcat-friendly predator control has also been approved to help support land managers to take more precautionary approaches.

3. Roo Campbell - Scottish wildcat Action, priority areas action –introduced the new team as follows:

Matt Wilson – covering Morvern matt.wilson@snh.gov.uk
Keri Langridge – covering Strathpeffer keri.langridge@snh.gov.uk
Emma Rawling – covering Strathbogie and Strathavon emma.rawling@snh.gov.uk
Hebe Carus – covering northern Strathspey and Angus Glens hebe.carus@snh.gov.uk
Vicky MacDonald – Communications Co-ordinator vicky.macdonald@snh.gov.uk
And Dave Barclay - Cat conservation project officer – DBarclay@rzss.org.uk

The main focus of Dave's role is to deliver the field work aspects of the conservation breeding programme. Dave will work with land owners and organisations interested in donating cats to the conservation breeding programme and those interested in releasing wildcats onto their land in the future.

Roo gave a summary of the different areas of action planned in the priority areas and some examples of the outcomes aimed for and project evaluation and monitoring.

Promoting Wildcat friendly predator control
- 450 workshop attendees
- 30 estates
- 6 ambassador estates
- 60 volunteers
- Protocols into 4 college courses & 2 industry courses

Wildcat-friendly land management
- Reduction in artificial food sources
- Increase in awareness of effects of ferals
- Updating land management guidance

Trap-neuter-release
- 10 long-term volunteers / priority area
- reduction (to near zero) of fertile feral cats

Responsible cat ownership
- Publicity drive online and at events
- Reduction in number of fertile domestic cats

Wildcat monitoring
- Comparison of cat numbers
- Intelligence on cat activity
- Increase knowledge on genetic status
- Increase knowledge on disease prevalence

The workshops will explore these areas of action in more detail.

4. Sarah Robinson - RZSS, presented an update on the conservation breeding programme. It has been identified as necessary part of SWCAP. There are animals already in captive collections that have been contacted and cats subject to genetic tests. In addition a licence has been issued to take wildcats from the wild for the purpose of breeding, with a view to developing a more genetically robust captive population for future release. Areas where landowners are already undertaking feral cat control are being targeted; initially outside of the priority areas. Areas of natural wildcat habitat are being fenced and will be used as off-show enclosures at the Highland Wildlife Park.

Helen Senn, RZSS described the process for screening animals for inclusion to the conservation breeding programme. This will include health screening and a protocol combining genetic and pelage information.

It was noted we can't yet look at genes for specific wildcat features e.g. blunt tail, stripe number, wild behaviour. Instead we have to assess a fairly random sample of the genes to work out approx. what % of the animals is wildcat. This is difficult to estimate partly because wildcats and domestic cat are inherently genetically very similar because they are close relatives. Hence we can only look at a small fraction of the total genes that are different in the two species.

A DNA assessment involving 35 markers has been developed by RZSS aligned with tests on other European wildcats. It provides an assignment to either a domestic or wildcat population (%) with stated confidence intervals. As with earlier genetics work, recent testing supports that the population of cats living in the wild in Scotland occupies a continuum between domestic cats and those we regard as 'wildcat' reference cats. Hence there is no clear biological step-change that could be used as a threshold to distinguish between domestic cats, hybrids and wildcats. Based on the testing to date, most wild-living cats appear to have some domestic markers. The same is true for the existing captive collections (although they have tended to have a higher proportion of wildcat markers). Hence the proposed criteria are pragmatic and balance the desire to aim high, with the recognition of the levels of hybridisation encountered. It is proposed that the cats selected for breeding should be better than a first generation back-cross (one grand-parent is a domestic cat). This proposed threshold can be raised if 'better quality' wildcats are found.

What the cat looks like provides a complementary independent assessment of the wildcat genome. A matrix is proposed to combine the genetic and pelage information, with borderline cases being referred for more detailed assessment. Cats selected for breeding will be those that meet both the genetic and the pelage criteria (7 pelage score 17+). A detailed paper on the selection criteria will be published shortly.

5. Vicky Macdonald, Scottish Wildcat Action – gave a presentation on how the work of the action plan will be widely promoted and communicated. This is recognised as an essential component of the action.

With so many organisations involved, it is imperative that we have a strong, simple and memorable brand that ties all of our activities together and is easily identifiable. "Scottish Wildcat Action" has therefore been chosen as the name for the website and it made sense to extend this to our brand as a whole. We wanted to preserve the link with the success of Highland Tiger, but also needed to highlight that is a new project and requires renewed public support, we want to be *the* source for news, advice, and information on Scottish wildcat conservation, celebrate the variety of partners, projects and activities all coming together to save this iconic species. With this in mind, we preserved the wildcat brandmark from the previous Highland Tiger logo but refreshed it with a new palette to express the urgency of our work.

www.scottishwildcataction.org is planned go live in August. We also have a Twitter account @SaveOurWildcats and the Highland Tiger facebook page will soon be repurposed.

Sharepoint is free and easy-to-use. It is a secure, online platform (part of Office 365) for storing, sharing and group editing of documents and files. It will be used to enable PR and communications staff within the partnership to access information and tools about Scottish Wildcat Action, including:

- Photo Library – images of wildcats, project photos, campaign banners and logos for your use.
- Plans – e.g. social media schedule or events and shows schedule, so that project partners can link in with each other and we can coordinate and maximise our reach.
- Presentations – example presentations you can use/modify for public talks.
- Key messages - vital that all project partners and staff use clear and consistent messages in our communications.
- Protocols – media protocol and briefing notes.

Vicky also highlighted the range of other communications activities planned over the course of the project:

- Attending events with target audiences
- Promotional merchandise, postcards, cat collars.
- A wildcat-friendly domestic cat ownership campaign – working with cat welfare charities.
- Schools resources and competitions.

6. Work shop feedback and questions raised in open sessions – chaired by Lindsay Mackinlay, NTS

- *What resources are available for work outside of priority areas?*

JB responded that the focus of the HLF project resources are the priority areas, but there may be ways of supporting others to do work elsewhere such as sharing equipment. LM highlighted that others are being encouraged to do work elsewhere such as NTS surveys on their properties.

- *The urgency of taking action was highlighted. Do we know how many wildcats are needed for release following conservation breeding? Should these be taken from Europe now.*

SR highlighted that population management planning is ongoing. The current approach is to recover Scottish wildcat populations reflecting the need to address the risks in the wild. But other sources could be considered in the future.

- *Have we considered seeking corporate sponsorship?*

A Fundraising Task group will be set up and any contributions or suggestions are welcomed.

- *Will the action plan partnership be lobbying for compulsory cat neutering?*

The action plan aims to promote neutering, vaccination and micro-chipping. JB highlighted there could be difficulties to implementing a compulsory neutering system where some owners may not recognise themselves as the cat's owner. Given the broad partnership of organisations it is not the remit of the partnership to lobby but we can gather evidence.

- *Might there be changes in landuse that may impact on populations and make it difficult to establish the causes of any changes?*

RC highlighted there will be some small mammal monitoring and small scale habitat assessment at camera locations. But we should consider if any large scale land use changes can also be captured.

Other comments

If we just select the best camera locations at the outset, it could be difficult to detect a population increase.

Neutered feral cats may maintain territories and exclude wildcats.

7. Summary and close

Will Boyd Wallis thanked everyone for their contributions, which had highlighted the complementarity of approaches being proposed and some areas for further consideration.

WORKSHOP SESSIONS

A: What would you do with this cat?
The SWCAP aims to reduce the risks to wildcats in priority areas and in parallel to develop a breeding for release programme as a safety net to populations in the wild. During the course of delivering this action we will need to make decisions about what to do about the individual wild-living cats that are encountered. Principally:
- During the TNR programme – which ones we neuter
- When engaging with land managers about their own predator control – which ones we advise them to release rather than dispatch.
- During the conservation breeding programme – which ones to select for breeding.

All of these decisions require an assessment of whether or not an animal is a wildcat and this is influenced by what information is available at the time to inform this assessment. This makes for a complicated set of criteria for those involved in making the decisions whether project staff or volunteers and also in terms of how we communicate this to the public.

Will Boyd Wallis, Andrew Kitchener and Helen Senn provided some background to the different types of assessment that are planned in delivering SWCAP and sought views on how they are likely to work in practice. 11 cat photos were presented as a prompt for discussion.
i. Participants were asked their response to what do with the first 3 cats if they were encountered by a keeper in the field – in which case all they may see is an imperfect view of what the cat looks like. A precautionary approach was supported.
ii. Participants were asked what they would do with the next 3 cats if they have been trapped for Trap-Neuter and Release – in which case they get a better look at the cat's pelage, but will not have genetic information available.
iii. Participants were asked what they would do with the next 3 cats if they had been trapped for the breeding for conservation programme. In this case both pelage and genetic information was available. It was noted from the examples the genetics and pelage assessments were not always in agreement.
iv. The last examples were a wildcat sighting and a road casualty – participants were asked whether they would submit a record of a domestic cat, hybrid or wildcat.

The discussions were supportive of the proposed criteria, but highlighted the challenges of making decisions and noted that these can be adapted as our knowledge and experience increases over time.

B: Wildcat Action – monitoring programme

Roo Campbell and Keri Langridge presented the planned trail camera and hair lure set-up protocols for the priority areas intended to assess change in the populations of both feral cats and wildcats. They briefly described the effort involved to have a reasonable prospect of detecting a 25% population change. Simulation studies indicate that we might need about 120 cameras over 60- 80 days per priority area.

Roo estimates that one person can set up four cameras per day, one person can check and re-bait eight cameras per day and one person can remove 10 cameras per day. Hence one person working full time can maintain about 40 cameras.

General points of discussion raised during the demonstration of camera set-up were:
1. Camera locations - linear features and habitat edges or offset?
2. Height of cameras - to reduce the bait being taken by foxes and badgers.
3. Protecting hair lures and cameras with plastic covers to prolong their life.
4. Number of cameras to use/ camera spacing – more/ wider bigger area; constant spacing or scalable grid.
5. Frequency of camera checks - bi-weekly check interval was preferred.
6. Static vs moveable camera placement over time – or a mix. Pros and cons were considered with regard to the ability to maximise the number of cat records vs accurately record population trends.
7. Number of priority areas to intensively survey reflecting effort required - the options discussed were all six areas or just four. All six areas were favoured for intelligence gathering purposes.
8. Whether to focus camera locations on the best habitat only or also on marginal habitats – only the best habitats was considered the best use of resources.
9. The potential as a citizen science project for involving people was welcomed.

C: TNR and feral cat management

Anna Meredith began the workshop with a presentation outlining the risks to wildcats from feral domestic cats and discussing the options for their management. Anna presented some current research into TNR as a technique for managing feral and 'unowned' cat populations worldwide and discussed some case studies. Studies have indicated that high rates of neutering are required to effect a long term reduction in feral cat populations (>70% of fertile feral cats). This evidence also highlights that neither TNR or lethal control methods are effective if not part of an integrated approach including education and prevention. It was recognised that most case studies are from island or urban situations and not the diffuse rural populations of cats we are likely to encounter. Elsewhere TNR is carried out for cat welfare or the conservation of bird, reptile or small mammals rather than the conservation of a native felid. Anna highlighted there is also limited information on feline disease in wildcats and the aim to gather more during this project. The issue of biosecurity for TNR traps etc was raised – to be followed up by Emma Rawling.

Some members of the audience indicated TNR was not their first choice of method. But recognised it is the agreed SWA approach and the effectiveness will be reviewed midway through the project.

The second half of the workshop was based on a scenario exercise to prompt discussions about the most effective ways to deal with feral cat issues in priority areas. This included: farm feral colonies, feral cat feeders, irresponsible owners, and cat dumpers. Each group was asked to evaluate each scenario for: risk to wildcats (disease, hybridisation, competition); the most effective method to

reducing/ removing these risks (TNR, Vaccination, other); how to best reach this audience with wildcat messages, and how to make a long-term impact on behaviour. Lots of ideas were discussed. Topics included:

- Prevention (" Turning off the tap " of supply of feral cats) is always key
- Education is also key- but messages need to be targeted to different groups depending on their interests.
- Respecting that in some cases the landowner's preference may be for lethal feral control, but promoting TNR though the project.
- Appealing to people's interest in and sense of responsibility for Scottish Wildcats may be more effective than a 'cat welfare' message alone in motivating people.
- Recognising not all cat issues are our remit- working in partnership with CP, SSPCA, PDSA etc with some cases.
- Investigate if tenancies could include a 'no cat' or 'only neutered cats' clause in leases in wildcat priority areas

Good consensus was reached about the general importance of education and persuasion. There was some appetite for compulsory neutering of cats and legislation in future for cat registration.

D: Land management for wildcats

Hebe Carus, Matt Wilson and Roo Campbell lead the discussion on the various methods of predator control available to land managers; lamping and shooting, snaring and cage trapping. Participants were asked to rate the level of effort they each require, their effectiveness for controlling predators and the risks to wildcats they pose. Discussion points as follows:

Lamping and shooting

- Ideas of other technology to use suggested to improve discrimination – night vision, thermal imaging.
- Most estates do use lamping for fox control
- The wildcat-friendliness is extremely dependent on the operator with the precautionary principle, motivation and training to apply being vital
- Lamping can be a highly targeted technique that can focus on an individual predator by repeat visits
- Although high in effort (due to needing at least 2 people during unsocial hours) it could be fitted around other tasks
- Has the benefit of keepers reporting what they are seeing and adding to our intelligence.

Snaring
- The efficiency of well-set snares was acknowledged
- The potential risk of prosecution from unintentionally catching a cat or other non-target protected species for most people wanting to control foxes was considered too high. Many people who previously used snares no longer do so for this reason.
- The suggestion was that snares should not be used in areas known to hold wildcats.
- Is there any collation of by-catch data –by SGA?

Live (Cage) Trapping

- The general consensus was that the effort was not significantly more than snaring, especially given the requirement for checking the trap once every 24 hours.
- Effort required can be reduced by placing the trap so that the door is visible from afar; also reducing disturbance and possibly using multi-media messaging.
- Traps are more cumbersome than snares to carry.
- Not considered to be as effective for foxes.

- Effectiveness is dependent on training. If training was provided by industry/colleges so that gamekeepers were comfortable with the method, then uptake would be more likely
- Initial failure to capture anything can easily put users off the technique. Effective training would reduce this.
- Is there guidance on trap designs for catching cats or a recommended trap/ supplier that could be used for estates taking up the SRDP option? Guidelines should include recommended mesh sizes and minimum cage size.
- Risk of catching wildcats during SRDP trapping and the possible need for training?

All Methods

- The wildcat-friendliness and to some extent effort required and effectiveness are all improved through guidance, training and application of the precautionary principle (if there is any doubt that a method might injure or kill a wildcat, then another method should be used, especially in areas where there are known to be wildcats.