

Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan Partnership – Steering Group

10th December 2015, SNH Battleby

Draft minutes

- Present:
- Eileen Stuart (chair) – Scottish Natural Heritage
 - Anna Meredith – Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Sciences
 - Andrew Kitchener – National Museums Scotland
 - Lindsay Mackinlay – National Trust for Scotland
 - Sarah Robinson- Royal Zoological Society of Scotland
 - Kenny Kortland – Forestry Commission Scotland
 - Jenny Bryce – Scottish Natural Heritage
 - Roo Campbell – Scottish Wildcat Action
 - Jo Pike – Scottish Wildlife Trust - by teleconference (part only)
- Apologies:
- Will Boyd Wallis – Cairngorms National Park Authority
 - George Macdonald – Scottish Gamekeepers Association
 - Pete Haskell – Scottish Wildlife Trust
 - Vicky MacDonald – Scottish Wildcat Action

The Agenda combined items from the SWCAP and SWA Steering groups (for which the composition is the same). The agenda was re-ordered to take previous minutes and actions towards the end and avoid repetition of items on the agenda.

1. Matters arising

Eileen wanted to record the progress and profile that has been achieved by the project to date and to record our thanks to the staff for their efforts. It was recognised that it had been a challenging and ambitious programme of work to establish, that was perhaps overly ambitious in the first year. It was noted that we would collectively review some of the challenges and provide practical support in ensuring realistic targets and job plans.

Staff have raised workload issues which has reinforced existing plans for an annual review of progress, with a view to adjusting work schedules to ensure they are sustainable. Proposals for additional support were made, e.g. Project Scotland volunteer to help with communications.

JP welcomed the planned review involving staff and partner organisations.

JP recognised the need for close scrutiny of communications at the outset to ensure the messages are appropriate, but that we should quickly move towards a set of agreed positions for expediency of working.

New AP 1 ES to coordinate a message of support for the team recognising the challenges and the significant progress made.

2. Update on Morvern

Matt Wilson had raised some of the challenges of the project was facing in Morvern, a number relating to Wildcat Haven also seeking to operate in the same area. Matt had proposed a case for doing some things slightly differently in Morvern than in the other priority areas; whether the intensity of survey, the timing of TNR, the level of local public and landowner engagement required.

Subsequent to proposing this item, Matt has tendered his resignation from the project, which he did not feel was achievable in a part time post - alongside existing work commitments.

These issues will need to be resolved in parallel to appointing a replacement.

New AP 2 Steering Group to revisit our statement on relations with Wildcat Haven clarifying the licensing situation and recognising the ongoing difficulties in operating against a backdrop of criticism of the partnership. JB to circulate a draft.

3. Clarification of SWA terminology for wildcats and use of the term hybrid.

The SNH SAC paper; Legal status of wildcats and their hybrids (SAC/2015/05) had been circulated for background.

AK highlighted that what we have proposed are 'identification criteria' and not definitions – all agreed with this wording and noted that the thresholds may change in light of more information or if there is an increase in average genetic or phenotypic scoring.

SR confirmed that the conservation breeding scoring 'identification criteria' incorporates both genetic and morphological criteria.

ES set out that where cats meet these 'identification criteria' we should refer to them consistently as wildcats, to avoid confusing the public, whilst recognising the hybrid status may be unknown or include a degree of hybridity.

Hybrids are not currently recognised as afforded legal protection and referring to hybrids may be interpreted to imply that individuals with some domestic traits are of lesser conservation value. An alternative terminology would be 'cats with predominantly wildcat characteristics', but this may prove too wordy for common usage.

At the domestic end of the spectrum, AM reminded the group of the International Society of Feline Medicine's guidance refers to 'owned' and 'unowned cats' in preference to 'feral' or 'wild-living' cats.

It was concluded that the agreed 'identification criteria' should be reflected in the wording used in project communications (communications plan and Q&A responses).

New AP 3 VM to be asked to review terminology for wildcats and hybrids in project comms.

4. Conservation breeding – update and decision protocol

SR reported the off-show enclosures at HWP are nearly complete. And that David Barclay has had positive discussions with a number of landowners.

Roisin and Dave have visited Carna CIC and they are developing proposal for a trial release to assess how captive cats adapt to the wild, i.e. a soft release onto the island, with cats radio-collared (as per AP in the SWCAP 3.2.3). The trial would have numerous benefits in trialling methods of release and monitoring techniques, which would in turn inform management of cats in enclosures in the breeding programme for future release. Post-graduate students could be involved in the research, with prey surveys being carried out in advance.

Further to discussion at the last meeting SR, AM, RC, VM and Roisin Campbell Palmer had met and discussed options for cats that do not meet the selection criteria for conservation breeding.

There was some discussion of certainty of the tests and decisions on cats that performed very well on one criteria, but not the other; referring to earlier discussions on identification criteria and the consequences for the conservation status of the local population. There was not a unanimous view on appropriate outcomes for phenotypic wildcats, however, the conservation breeding protocol sets out that decisions will be made on a case by case basis for borderline cats.

The SNH license allows for phenotypic wildcats (pelage score 17 or more) to be released and where landowners are willing to have cats returned this option should be followed.

For cats that clearly do not meet the selection criteria and where the landowner would not want them returned, it was agreed that the cats will be humanely euthanased. Although it is recognised that there will be public sensitivity to this, there was not felt to be a good justification for returning known-hybrids where there is not a co-ordinated TNR approach (i.e. outwith priority areas).

Within priority areas actions are ongoing to create safe places for wildcats now and into the future. A key action in priority areas is to co-ordinate a programme of TNVR, releasing non-native domestic cats back to the wild under license from SNH. TNVR is part of a long-term approach to reduce feral cat numbers and ensure only wildcats are able to breed in the wild. The TNVR approach is complemented by work to raise public awareness of responsible domestic cat ownership. This complementary package of work will be needed to reduce the flow of feral cats into the countryside in the long-term.

Outwith priority areas there is not currently a co-ordinated programme of TNVR and there is not a strong case for returning individual neutered non-native cats as opposed to humanely euthanasing these few individuals. It was again noted that in wildlife management death of an animal is itself not considered to be a welfare issue.

The decision protocol will be kept under review.

New AP 4 AM to forward the note of the meeting to JB. JB to produce an updated Q&A briefing on this topic reflecting these discussions.

5. Fundraising Task Group

JB had circulated a note from the task group meeting held in October. Representation from partners could be improved and further suggestions are welcomed of partners with fundraising expertise.

The need for further fundraising was highlighted to meet the existing funding gap in the HLF project funding and for wider SWCAP actions. Options for fundraising had been considered.

A few promising options had been highlighted and would be followed up when more details are available. Eligibility criteria for most funding sources require that applications are from an NGO, charity or constituted community group. Hence the help of partner organisations will be required.

Partners had been asked to highlight any ethical concerns about potential funders.

New AP 5 SG members to request help from their fundraising teams (where appropriate) to help with co-ordinating a few select and carefully targeted applications in early 2016.

It was noted that addressing the funding gap will be easier early in the project rather than when works are already underway. It was recognised there is also a role for partners to provide feedback to major funders. There was further discussion of resourcing within the partnership and whether additional help with fundraising could be sought, for example by supporting a fundraising post that would cover its own cost as suggested by VM.

New AP 6 JB to reconvene Fundraising Task Group in January.

6. Proposal to adopt Mammal Tracker App for wildcat records

The HLF application had included a proposal for a wildcat reporting App. Since then there has been further thinking about uptake of a specific wildcat app and the general move towards responsive websites. The Mammal Society already has an App that allows reporting of wildcat records (but not unowned cats or hybrids). The Mammal Society has consented to modify and make use of the existing App to further the aims of SWA. The data submitted via Mammal Tracker is received into the BRC records, for which project staff can be set up as verifiers and limits placed on the resolution of viewing records on a map. A facility to directly input data to the BRC database through iRecord could also be hosted on the project website in place of the temporary sightings reports. Quotes are being sought for this development work.

The group supported that the Mammal Tracker App and iRecord website facility be pursued as having greater legacy and potentially greater uptake.

New AP 7 JB to seek approval for changes to the original proposal and budget from HLF.

7. Priority Areas update

RC provided an update on progress with the project since the August meeting. It has been a very busy time for all the team. A large focus has been on setting up the monitoring programme in the six priority areas to help assess the impact of the conservation work and as part of the intelligence gathering on unowned cats that will be targeted for TNVR later in the year. Recruitment and training of volunteers to help with this work has been a large time commitment of staff and has been hugely successful. However the scale of the task and the lead in time to procure, distribute and site all the project equipment has been underestimated and will have some impact on the final number of cameras that is achievable and the timescales for this first survey. Landowner permissions are well advanced.

The project team notably Emma Rawlings, working with AM, Cats Protection and local vets has completed the protocols and supporting guidance for the project's TNVR work. All the project staff attended a TNVR training and discussion day in late November. Following which it been agreed to timetable the bulk of our TNVR activity to begin in the late summer 2016 for several reasons including; the lead in time to recruit and train volunteers following the busy survey period and avoiding catching pregnant females and young of either cats or other non-target species. In the meantime, *ad hoc* TNVR will be conducted in the PAs where a clear need is identified and resources permit. The cat neutering campaign and the TNVR campaign will launch in early summer 2016.

The forecast for project spend to the end of this financial year is currently £324 K. This represents 17% of the total budget. The increase in spend in the second half of this year reflects the purchase of field equipment and the forecasted cost of volunteer and staff expenses during fieldwork.

VM had provided an update on comms activity; noting as of 1st December the website has 2500 users, facebook 6444 and twitter 908 followers. Working with our partner organisations has been very productive with many hosting or planning articles in their own publications. The social media community is developing and is so far our most effective means of engaging with audiences. As the content is refreshed there has also been a notable increase in positive engagement and interaction between followers. Unfortunately there has been some criticism of SWA and unfounded and inaccurate negative comments directed at project supporters.

SEO would benefit from further work to improve the website ranking.

The sightings facility was noted as an area for improvement and work is ongoing to develop an alternative.

The project media mentions were listed and impacts assessed as overall positive in each of the last three months. However, the ongoing public criticism of the project by Wildcat Haven was noted as having a negative impact, hence efforts to communicate the good work of the project will continue.

8. Actions from previous meetings

From 6th November 2014

AP 2 – The Fundraising Task Group to be asked to meet and develop a plan for fund raising to deliver the SWCAP in full. **Discharged.**

From 14th May 2015

AP 5 RC, AM and SR to explore the options for cats not selected for conservation breeding. **Discharged.**

From 17th August 2015

AP 1 JB to respond to correspondence and highlight that the resources of the priority areas work is currently focused, but in the surrounding areas we support and encourage those keen to see action to engage with partners to see where additional benefits can be gained. **Discharged.**

Further correspondence had been received from Elspeth Stirling highlighting the urgency of TNR in priority areas and seeking clarification on project timescales. JB had responded indicating the project timetable will be published shortly and the main push for TNR will be next summer in conjunction with the responsible cat ownership campaign.

AP 2 AM to engage the TNR task group in the preparation of a justification for enhancing the powers to address the issues posed by feral cats and irresponsible domestic cat ownership, with some practical options for implementation. This should focus on, but not be restricted to impacts on wildcats. **Carried forward.**

AP 3 Steering Group to test the support for enhanced powers relating to domestic cat ownership with Scottish Government and other bodies SSPCS, CP, BVA, Species Champions. **Carried forward.**

AP 4 All to explore with colleagues how to help build support for proposals for enhancing powers relating to domestic cat ownership. **Carried forward.**

AP 5 All to suggest funding colleagues to contribute to a meeting in the autumn. **Discharged.**

AP 6 All to provide RC with any comments on the monitoring paper by the end of August. **Discharged.**

AP 7 JB to contact action leads individually and seek to develop some key performance measures, milestones and costs. **Ongoing.**

AP 8 All to provide comments of the draft Q&A responses and any missing questions by 27th August. **Carried forward.** It had not been possible to finalise following ongoing discussions, but should now be possible noting discussions under items 2 and 4.

9. AOB

- It was noted Springwatch plans to feature a potential wildcat in Strathspey, HWP release enclosures, nest boxes and genetic screening at RZSS.

- LM highlighted the survey of NTS properties.

New AP 8 LM to circulate a list of NTS properties to be surveyed for wildcats.

New AP 9 LM to clarify with VM the NTS time available to help with video editing.

- AM updated that a further 13 cats are awaiting post mortem, with 23 already completed.
- RC highlighted that project presentations are available on Sharepoint for others to use and adapt for talks.
- JB highlighted that SNH [Commissioned Report 899](#) would shortly be published.
- ES proposed that the Scottish Wildcat Action Forum might be later in 2016, in the autumn, with a SG and staff get together possibly in early summer involving a site visit.

10. DONM

Late March 2016.

Summary of outstanding actions

From 17th August 2015

AP 2 AM to engage the TNR task group in the preparation of a justification for enhancing the powers to address the issues posed by feral cats and irresponsible domestic cat ownership, with some practical options for implementation. This should focus on, but not be restricted to impacts on wildcats. **Carried forward.**

AP 3 Steering Group to test the support for enhanced powers relating to domestic cat ownership with Scottish Government and other bodies SSPCS, CP, BVA, Species Champions. **Carried forward.**

AP 4 All to explore with colleagues how to help build support for proposals for enhancing powers relating to domestic cat ownership. **Carried forward.**

AP 7 JB to contact action leads individually and seek to develop some key performance measures, milestones and costs. **Ongoing.**

AP 8 All to provide comments of the draft Q&A responses and any missing questions by 27th August. **Carried forward.** It had not been possible to finalise following ongoing discussions, but should now be possible noting discussions under items 2 and 4.

From 10th December 2015

AP 1 ES to coordinate a message of support for the team recognising the challenges and the significant progress made.

AP 2 Steering Group to revisit our statement on relations with Wildcat Haven clarifying the licensing situation and recognising the ongoing difficulties in operating against a backdrop of criticism of the partnership. JB to circulate a draft.

AP 3 VM to be asked to review terminology for wildcats and hybrids in project comms.

AP 4 AM to forward the note of the meeting to JB and JB to produce updated Q&A briefing on this topic reflecting these discussions.

AP 5 SG members to request help from their fundraising teams (where appropriate) to help with coordinating a few select and carefully targeted applications in early 2016.

AP 6 JB to reconvene Fundraising Task Group in January.

AP 7 JB to seek approval for changes to the original proposal and budget from HLF.

AP 8 LM to circulate a list of NTS properties to be surveyed for wildcats.

AP 9 LM to clarify with VM NTS time available to help with video editing.