

Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan Partnership – Steering Group

18th March 2015

SNH Battleby

Draft minutes

Present: Eileen Stuart (chair) – Scottish Natural Heritage
Andrew Kitchener – National Museums Scotland
Lindsay Mackinlay – National Trust for Scotland
Olly Davies – Scottish Wildlife Trust
Sarah Robinson - Royal Zoological Society of Scotland
Helen Senn - Royal Zoological Society of Scotland
Will Boyd Wallis – Cairngorms National Park Authority
George Macdonald – Scottish Gamekeepers Association
Rob Ogden – Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (pm only)
Jenny Bryce – Scottish Natural Heritage
Roo Campbell – Wildcat Action Project Manager

Apologies: Anna Meredith – Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Sciences

1. Welcome and Apologies

Apologies from Anna Meredith. George was welcomed back and Roo Campbell was welcomed to the meeting as the Project Manager for Wildcat Action. Helen Senn (RZSS) was welcomed to present the paper for agenda item 7.

Olly is shortly to start work with RZSS (hence will still have some involvement) and SWT will update the group on his replacement as comms lead. Rob is also shortly to go on sabbatical and RZSS will be represented by Sarah.

The agenda for meetings will now be split between the Wildcat Action project steering group and the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan Steering group which will deal with all wider action plan matters.

2. Minutes, matters arising from previous meetings

From 29th May 2014

AP 3 Action leads to update timescales and milestones and to complete a RAG report on progress (as appropriate) for the next Steering Group meeting. **On agenda.**

AP 4 FS to prepare a template for the SWCAP task based budget. **On agenda.**

From 20th August 2014

AP 8 LM to convene a meeting of NGOs to discuss policies on feral cat control on their land. **Discharged.** NGO's had met. It had been agreed the focus for now would be on the priority areas and they might look at how measures could be applied more widely once the project has established the principles.

From 6th November 2014

AP 1 – JB to review Dropbox access privileges and ensure everyone has write permission to the progress report so leads can update their actions. **Discharged.** The SNH version does not allow editing. Andrew Kitchener offered to host the SWCAP RAG report to facilitate this.

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

From 17th December 2014

AP 1 JB to circulate the Elspeth Stirling's note on feral cat management options. **Discharged.**

AP 2 ES to write to Wildcat Haven and copy to FCS the group's views on the current scope for sharing data and working collaboratively in Morvern. **Discharged.**

AP 3 JB to circulate the final version of the Project Agreement and the Appendix of project costs for final approval by partners. **Discharged.** Copies were available for signing.

There was some discussion around the PR protocol. It was clarified that the 72 hour notice period primarily applies to pro-active news releases rather than responsive coverage. Olly described the intention to have a Communications Toolkit with resources available to partners to produce articles for their own purposes, based on agreed key messages. Much of this would be co-ordinated by the Wildcat Action comms person when in post. It was noted it is still useful for others to have sight of upcoming articles in advance to maximise opportunities.

AP 4 JB to confirm arrangements for interviews with panel members, including agreeing interview questions and the process for scoring. **Discharged.**

AP 5 JB to confirm the arrangements for conducting the sift of applications. **Discharged.**

AP 6 OD to lead on developing the website contract brief for letting via SNH (as budget holders). **Discharged.**

AP 7 all to submit comments on the captive breeding trapping protocol to SR by mid-January. **Discharged.**

AP 8 OD to work with Fergus Macneill to produce some guidance for partners producing their own coverage relating to the SWCAP. **Overtaken by Communications Toolkit.**

AP 9 JB to discuss in more detail the arrangements for documenting Wildcat Action with Pete Cairns. **Discharged.** Communications Co-ordinator to follow up when in post to schedule events to be covered and agree the terms of an agreement.

ES informed the Group that another filmmaker has approached SNH seeking support for making a wildcat film. She outlined the proposal and noting the quality of the images shared so far. She indicated that SNH has been supportive in principle.

OD highlighted that Wildscreen provide a link between filmmakers and conservation projects.

LM reminded that NTS have as part of their contribution to the project allocated staff time to help capture video footage.

It was agreed that ES would respond, confirming that the Steering Group was supportive of the proposal to undertake high quality filming of Scottish Wildcats which would raise awareness of their conservation status. The response should confirm that a number of other individuals and organisations were also filming wildcats within the Project and that currently all Project resources were committed to the agreed outputs.

Matters arising

GM raised the challenge of engaging keepers and estates in the project that would not naturally support TNR.

LM was keen to formalise arrangements for sharing information/ papers with the other NGO partners. This was agreed where they are partners in SWCAP.

Wildcat Action – Steering Group discussion

3. Wildcat Action recruitment

JB reported that the posts had been very popular and had attracted a very strong field of candidates. Steering Group members had assisted with the sift of applications and with interviews. Following which the following have been appointed:

- Roo Campbell – Project Manager – based at SNH Great Glen House
- Vicky MacDonald – Communications Co-ordinator – based with the Scottish Wildlife Trust in Leith.
- Matt Wilson – Project Officer (Monitoring) (0.5 FTE) covering the Morvern priority area.
- Keri Langridge - Project Officer (Monitoring) (0.5 FTE) covering the Strathpeffer priority area and based with National Trust for Scotland, Inverness.
- Emma Rawling – Project officer (TNR and community liaison) – covering Strathbogie and Strathavon and based with Forestry Commission Scotland in Elgin.
- Hebe Carus – Project officer (Land management) – covering northern Strathspey and Angus Glens and based at RZSS, Highland Wildlife Park.

Roo and Vicky will attend future Steering group meetings.

New AP 1 The new team to be announced in the national and local press. JB to prepare a draft news release for circulation.

OD suggested the PO's may seek to have a regular column in the local press.

4. Morvern update

ES outlined recent correspondence with Wildcat Haven and from Morvern residents regarding the interaction of the two projects.

New AP 2 - JB – RC To develop a standard line to take on the interaction between Wildcat Haven and Wildcat Action for all partners to use.

Once the team is in post there will be a more visible presence in Morvern and coverage in the local press.

5. Arrangements for supporting volunteers

LM had circulated a short paper setting out the benefits of a bespoke cloud based volunteer management database. Since the HLF application was submitted it transpires that volunteers cannot be covered by NTS insurance and that as budget holders, SNH/ the project team will need to administer volunteer expenses.

A stand-alone volunteer database has the advantage of being accessible from anywhere, by any partner and it can continue after the lifetime of the project. The front end of the system (via Volunteer Squared- Better Impact) is also aligned with other volunteering opportunities.

The cost implications are the purchase of customised software, training and an annual fee.

As a government agency, SNH self-insures by instead having procedures to manage the risks, which requires that volunteers are on a database with emergency contact details etc. To pay volunteer expenses will require that SNH holds some personal details of volunteers. The system used is essentially the same as for staff and volunteering opportunities can be advertise in the same way as job opportunities on the SNH jobs web portal, with applicants entering their own details.

Hence the alternative would be to use SNH systems during the project and migrate volunteer's details to another system towards the end of the project to promote continuity, yet avoid having to maintain two databases during the project's operation. A system will need to be devised to record volunteer time.

New AP 3 – all were asked to provide comment to LM by 6th April on whether we should employ a cloud based system or rely on SNH systems for supporting volunteers.

6. A.O.B.

A student had contacted LM and JB with a view to carrying out some research on wildcats related to the project in the priority areas. Anticipating a number of similar requests, we discussed the principle; which could bring opportunities for additional research and also some risks for the project if the relationship to the project is not clearly communicated. Ideally we would like to discuss with their supervisor and have the opportunity to input to project design and to secure sight of the results. It may be appropriate for the Project Officer to make an initial contact with participants so they can explain the relationship between the research and the project.

SWCAP Steering group discussion

7. Website Development

OD had prepared a Statement of Requirements for the design of a website structure and functionality which had been sent to three web developers for quotes. The developers have been invited to give a presentation of their proposals in the next few weeks; following which one will be awarded the contract. It is aimed to have a new site operating by mid-May.

A paper on branding had been circulated to the group; detailing some of the decisions to be made that would influence the look and structure of the new website.

A number of options for branding and nesting of content were discussed. The preference was for a single SWCAP site with a clear active brand and good search engine optimisation – Scottish Wildcat Action. A description of the Wildcat Action project (and logos and funders) would sit within this, as would content on the breeding for re-introduction programme. The Highland Tiger brand mark would be retained and continuity provided by other content being migrated from HT including Facebook and Youtube.

SR confirmed that the Highland Tiger appeal was now a restricted fund within RZSS for SWCAP purposes and again would be migrated.

New AP 4 – OD to contact the comms task group re-designing the logo.

It was agreed that a smaller team would be needed to make decisions on the website; including Vicky, Roo, OD replacement (SWT), Jon-Paul Orsi from RZSS and Jenny.

8. Genetics update

Helen Senn presented a paper which set out the background in terms of recent DNA testing and confidence limits and a proposal for a genetic threshold for the conservation breeding programme. The test proposed by RZSS builds on the 14 SNP test used in SNH Commissioned report 768 and seeks to achieve greater confidence in the estimate of the proportion of the genome that is wildcat (Qhat STRUCTURE assignment). The 35 SNP test is comparable to other European research and strikes a compromise in terms of the time taken to test a larger sample of markers and the added gains in terms of confidence. The test is only capable of distinguishing 3rd or 4th generation backcrosses from 'putative pure' wildcats. N.B. the test recognises there is some uncertainty about the reference cats used to select the SNP markers used, but uses the differences in the array of DNA to differentiate into two populations rather than assuming the SNP markers are diagnostic.

HS clarified that the markers are selected to be spread across the genome and hence less likely to be related, but it is not known what characters they relate to or if they are under selective pressure. i.e. unlikely to relate to pelage which is conferred by a small number of genes.

It is recognised the relationship between DNA and pelage may be weak as there will be outliers, e.g. black cats. So far only a relatively small sample of the cats assessed have both DNA and pelage assessments.

The pelage assessment is a separate sample of the genome and will be used in combination with DNA testing.

The proposed threshold is that we should be 90% confident that the animal is better than 75% wildcat to breed from them (equivalent to in the worst case scenario their grandmother being a domestic cat, but likely to be a result of a far more complex history of hybridisation) and should score well on pelage (17 or better). It is proposed this threshold is operated on a precautionary basis and can be reviewed if animals of greater wildcat ancestry are found. Again intermediate cases will be subject to further consideration.

New AP 5 HS to revise the genetics thresholds paper following discussions and recirculate.

It is proposed to submit the paper for independent review and in a longer timeframe, scientific publication; noting the science and the decision are slightly separate.

New AP 6 JB to send genetics thresholds paper for review on behalf of the Steering group.

It was noted that in the field identification would still rely on the cat's appearance. Hence different thresholds would be applied. A three tier approach was agreed:

- i. In the field – based on a precautionary field based assessment – any potential wildcats are let go.
- ii. During TNR – a more detailed pelage assessment is possible and a 17 TPS applied. Cats scoring less than this would be taken to the vets and neutered. A second opinion would be sought on borderline cats (n.b. a blood sample taken for research purposes).
- iii. Breeding for release programme – DNA testing and pelage assessment would be carried out and used in combination.

New AP 7 Need to consider how we communicate these thresholds to a wider audience. JB/ RC to develop some lines to take and bring back to Steering Group for comment.

8. Captive breeding update.

RZSS now have a license to trap wildcats for the purpose of conservation breeding programme. The draft protocol will be used to select animals for breeding and there are extensive facilities at HWP to hold cats while testing and disease screening is ongoing.

Land managers have been asked to get in touch if they are interested in participating via SGA.

Some limited trapping is planned, but most will likely be later in the year post breeding.

New AP 8 SR to re-circulate the trapping protocol to the steering group.

9. Wildcat Forum

Possible dates were proposed as 27th or 28th May.

The format was discussed and all were keen it was interactive and encouraged input from wider partners and stakeholders. A workshop style format with outdoor sessions was suggested, possibly in one of the priority areas, e.g. Boat of Garten Village hall.

New AP 9 JB, WBW, LM and SR to discuss proposals and organise forum.

10. SWCAP Progress and budget reports

A column for budgets had been added to the RAG report as per actions in SWCAP. Actions have now been coded by delivery project as 'Wildcat Action', 'breeding for re-introduction programme' etc, but there are some actions that contribute to several projects.

More detailed GANTS can be developed for individual projects, but this RAG report aims to review overall progress and highlight where things may be slipping.

Some actions still require milestones and timescales before progress can be recorded.

New AP 10 Action Leads to review budgets, timescales and milestones for their actions and update on the dropbox version hosted by Andrew.

11. A.O.B.

It was discussed it would be helpful to invite SG to a future meeting for a discussion on legal status.

12. D.O.N.M

Early May – JB to doodle poll.

Summary of outstanding actions

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