

Sleat Community Trust Environment Advisory Group

Minutes of meeting on 31st January 2022, 7:30 pm, via zoom

1. Attendance and apologies

Present: Ade Stokes (chair), Peter Roberts, Alan Drever, Roddy Murray, Tim Godfrey, Veronica Barrington, Lisa Pook, Chris Pendlebury, Dorothy Jackson (minutes)

Apologies: Evelyn Roe, Catherine de Vries

Roger has decided to step down from the EAG due to other commitments. The group expressed their heartfelt thanks to Roger for his consistently positive contribution over 18 years, drawing on his extensive knowledge and valuable expertise in environmental matters. Roger has agreed to remain on our BCC list going forwards for networking purposes.

2. Previous minutes

The minutes of the last meeting were accepted.

3. Matters arising

Winter programme

Bob McMillan's talk, organised by Roger, attracted over 70 attendees and was very well received, reflecting Bob's standing as one of Scotland's foremost ornithologists. For more information about Skye birds, Bob's website is highly recommended.

Vanessa Charles and Martin Hynd will give a zoom talk on "Exploring our hidden world: diving for citizen science" on 24th Feb. Dorothy will liaise with Vanessa and Martin. Advertising to go out 2 weeks-10 days beforehand. Ade will again send out the zoom link to attendees.

SCT Environment policy: Catherine, Mhairi C., Mike S., Alan and Dorothy met to agree the content and format of the draft policy. Catherine will finalise the draft for presentation to the Board by Ade at end of February. The policy working group suggested meeting quarterly for review and update.

Beach Clean Station: Dorothy spoke to Peggy who did not express a view on the fate of our beach clean station, and recognises the problems with beach clean stations that we have identified. SCTEAG is now on Peggy's list of Skye groups involved with beach cleaning. Ade to contact Jennie Chapman of Skye Litterpick project, to see if she wants the station.

Tormore Forest peatland restoration: Work started over Christmas. Alan was not able to attend the first site meeting. Chris P. reported that a map of the area rehabilitated so far was submitted with a request for the first tranche of payment. The contractor is taking up and burying stumps to smooth the land surface, reduce runoff speed and increase absorption of water. The area will look bare until vegetation is re-established. Trees to be removed are being felled (40 loads), and procedures agreed for previous timber extraction will be followed. Due to health and safety rules that restrict access to the site, it is difficult to obtain a good photo of the contractor in operation for the next press release. Paddy MacKay may be able to help with drone images.

Community sports facility at SMO: no further development to date.

Invasive non-native species (INNS): The first action will be to revisit rhododendron sites to tackle any new growth - probably 1st and 3rd Sunday in March, before the ferry timetable change and road traffic increases. Lisa will contact The Highland Council again about their responsibilities not to spread INNS through verge management procedures.

Future projects: Martin McGillivray is receptive to idea of seaweed farming. Ade intends to do further research, and talk to Mark de Vries who has investigated this issue.

4. Voluntourism

Claire Christy, of the Radical Travel collective of Scottish mini-bus tour companies, contacted SCT offering volunteer help (staff and clients) for green and community projects. They will bring 8-12 staff on 22nd March to volunteer in Tormore Forest (bothy & polytunnel) plus a tour of Tormore Forest and an excursion to Capisdal. They want to develop a holiday around volunteering and tourism for 6 days at end of October, which is not ideal in terms of weather. Options include paths making/maintenance (e.g. Capisdal), building bridges and beach cleaning on the less accessible beaches (such as north of Point in direction of Tarskavaig) and other suitable beaches to be identified. Tim has cleaned the other beaches at Point. There are no costs to SCT. The volunteers will be based in Portree, will work in the mornings, and have free time in the afternoons. As Chris will be away during October, Duncan MacInnis will lead during the visit. For events in Capisdal, Maggie MacDonald will be approached, with view to educational input. Chris P. to develop ideas and feed back to EAG. If there are further thoughts, contact Chris P.

5. White-tailed eagles

Alan circulated last year's analysis of prey remains in and below the nest and a compilation of previous years' analysis. The main prey is carrion, seabirds and fish. Prey remains over the 4-year analysis period, included very few lambs. Prey preferences are usually consistent among WTE pairs. The information may be sent to crofters, but it does not show the full extent of the causes of lamb death, which also include poor spring weather and predation by foxes. Crofters are in dialogue with Nature Scot re compensation. Roddy noted that there was a need to continue to monitor the situation, ensuring that the information is there for everyone to see.

The dead White-tailed Eagle found in Trotternish had bird flu.

6. Ancient semi-natural woodland

Dorothy had circulated [a link](#) to the interactive map of the Native Woodlands of Scotland Survey which enables a close look at the woodland on Sleat, much of which is classed as native, and some of it ancient semi-natural woodland. Catherine commented by email that according to Scottish Planning Policy 'Ancient semi-natural woodland is an irreplaceable resource and, along with other woodlands, hedgerows and individual trees, especially veteran trees of high nature conservation and landscape value, should be protected from adverse impacts resulting from development'. With recent concern about roadside felling, CDLT tree work and loss of native woodland for housing plots she felt that our local ancient woodland is something we need to celebrate more, e.g. by inviting a tree expert to give a talk about the ancient woodland we have here in Sleat.

Alan noted that there was a lot of pressure on native woodland, from overgrazing and browsing by red deer and sheep. House plots are also contributing to the demise of native woodland. What appear to be negligibly small areas cleared for housing are building up over time, resulting in fragmentation of the woodland with potential loss of ecological function – 'death by a thousand cuts'. Sleat Community Council's involvement is needed from a planning approval perspective, and there is a need to engage with the planning department to increase awareness of the impacts of their decisions.

Alan to look into possibilities of visits to areas of native woodland.

7. Clan Donald Lands Trust tree management

The notes of a meeting between the new CDLT CEO Alex Stoddart, Lisa, Catherine and Ade is appended. Alex Stoddart has also published an open letter about CDLT's tree maintenance programme. While relatively few trees were deemed needing felling on CDLT land, EAG members stressed the biodiversity value of keeping old wood and trees wherever possible. Lisa noted that the new CEO's approach to managing the estate has a more ecological perspective, and is aimed at making Armadale Castle and gardens a more positive place for everyone.

8. 2022 EAG meeting schedule

Ade produced a draft schedule comprising a mix of monthly and bi-monthly meetings, to average out as 7-8 meetings across the calendar. Ade to confer with Catherine about which days of the week are feasible for her, prior to finalising the schedule.

9. AOB

Roddy expressed concern about the apparent increase in buildings going up without planning permission, which is then sought retrospectively. However, planners are not issuing stop notices while the retrospective planning application is considered. Examples include a very large excavation at Gillen, described as a 'horse arena'. Roddy has consulted the planning officer and will raise the Gillen site again with Sleat Community Council.

10. Date of next meeting

Tuesday 8th March by zoom.

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Annex:

Notes of a meeting to discuss tree work being done around Armadale Castle, by Ade Stokes.

The EAG (represented by me and Catherine de Vries) attended an introductory meeting with new CDLT CEO Alex Stoddart, accompanied by Lisa, on Tuesday 25 January. The meeting was prompted by concerns raised by residents about the work being done on trees around Armadale Castle.

Following introductions and a conversation about the challenges and opportunities CDLT is assessing, we moved on to discuss the trees work.

Why is the work being done?

The motivation is to improve safety for the public and employees alike following concerns about the state of trees near to footpaths and therefore the possibility of injuries and damage in the event of adverse weather conditions.

How has the remedial work required been assessed?

CDLT has engaged a professional, external company to survey trees in and around the Castle grounds. All of the trees surveyed have been numbered and the work required for each numbered tree has been noted. This ranges from 'no action required' to further work required according to three priority levels. These levels represent preliminary work needed to conduct further investigation (e.g. to cut ivy vines) to removal of limbs to felling in the most extreme circumstance. Alex emphasised that conservation is of utmost importance with the exception of safety aspects.

Which other external parties have been involved?

Scottish Forestry have been informed of the work required on a quadrant basis. CDLT have also been working with their insurers to ensure compliance with their requirements for underwriting the risk.

How long will the work take and who is doing it?

The remedial work is being done by CDLT arborist, John Finlayson. External support is being enlisted when additional specialist equipment is required. The work is ongoing along main paths and subsequent surveys along more minor paths may lead to further remedial actions so at this time it is not clear when the work will be completed.

Why hasn't the work been communicated to the wider community?

Ideally this would have been done earlier but the focus has been on the task in hand. In hindsight, however, any communications issued would have quickly become outdated as the scale of the task grew. CDLT has written an Open Letter to the Community which you can view [online](#), or on the community shop notice board.

In addition, Alex would like to hold an open 'meet the CEO' event at Armadale Castle in the near future so members of the community can learn more about CDLT's plans and activities.

End.