

Wester Ross Environment Network Meeting

Friday 20th January 2006, Achnasheen Village Hall

Present: John Rippen, Kristine Mackenzie, Aaron Forsyth, Peter Davidson, Steve Webster, Meryl Carr, John Wilkins, Tom Kilbride, Peter Cunningham, Kenny Nelson, Karen Starr, Rob Dewar, Bob Kindness, Nicole Wallace, Jonathon Willet, Kenna Chisholm, Lloyd Gudgeon

Apologies: Sue Scott, Allan Booth, Richard Greene, Claire Munday, Ewen McPherson

1. Welcome and introduction

LG welcomed everyone to the meeting, and asked that the previous meetings minutes be approved. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved.

2. Election of Officers

LG explained that there were a number of opportunities in the next year or so for WREN to have a raised public profile, and that it might be beneficial if the Chair and treasurer's posts could be filled by volunteer members of the network rather than staff of agencies or quangos. There was agreement on this, so LG resigned as Chair, and Aaron Forsythe was nominated and duly elected as the new Chair. AF took over running the meeting from this point. Peter Davidson was elected WREN Treasurer, and LG was asked and agreed to continue as secretary.

3. Report on previously-funded projects

3.1 Loch monitoring project

JR reported that due to the hurricane in January last year, and the subsequent scale and cost of the clean-up operation (which is still going on), this project has not progressed very far. Base-line data is available in the form of aerial photographs and the initial survey data, but it has been impossible to get safe access to the lochans since the storm. Some volunteers are going to be trained in use of chainsaws, and a clean up programme will be implemented which will ensure access. Meanwhile, LG suggested that the equipment this project requires be purchased now and stored until such time as the lochans are accessible.

3.2 Loch Maree Fish Survey and Awareness Raising day

This project has been completed, PC reported. The survey was well attended by volunteers, and so a number of additional survey sites were assessed. Interesting initial findings show considerable numbers of minnows and no young trout. Lack of trout could be real, or could be a reflection of the survey methodology: this is being investigated further. Minnows are a recently introduced species in Loch Maree, and are thought to compete with young trout for food. The minnows in the relatively still water of the Loch are all

infected with tape worms, which may have an effect on black throated divers, as the worm requires a bird host for one developmental stage.

The survey will be expanded in future to compare Loch mare with other local lochs, particularly Lochs Claire and Coulin, and will investigate deeper waters, where minnows are less likely, perhaps by using non-lethal nets rather than electro-fishing. A report of the project is available.

3.3 Biodiversity of River Carron

This project set out to do an audit of fish-dependant species in the River Carron system, including otters and many species of bird, following heavy re-stocking of the river with salmon and trout. Catches are still rising, currently by about 50% a year, so an increase in numbers of fish-dependant species should be visible soon. In this survey many species of bird were recorded including osprey, sea eagle, divers, mergansers, herons, kingfisher, dipper, along with otters and even a seal. However, many of these species were recorded only once or occasionally, so may be transient visitors to the river at this stage.

3.4 Submersible ROV Dive day

AF reported that the two dive days were very successful, but different. The first, based at Ullapool harbour during the gala day of Fish Week, involved over 100 people. This was despite a last minute hitch with the bus hire, resulting a much less flexible bus being used. The second, at Dundonnell, involved 6 children and their parents (by insisting that each child brought a parent along the group did not have to go through lengthy disclosure procedures). AF showed some footage recorded by the ROV during this dive day.

There was significant interest from WREN members at the meeting in having a similar event in their own areas. AF would like t have the chance to make the facilities available to any group wishing to experience the dives, and he encouraged them to get in touch with him.

For information, AF pointed out that having purchased the equipment and applied for funding for the dive days, he was unable to recover the equipment hire and maintenance charges. In future in such circumstances, he recommended that a project applicant should not own the equipment being used by a project, but should hire it from another community group. That way equipment running costs can be recovered.

3.5 Crofting biodiversity – implementing change

KM reported that unfortunately this project had to be cancelled due to significant increases in costs. LG pointed out that the funds originally allocated to it had been partly re-allocated to the Loch Maree fish survey project, and the remainder is still available to us for re-allocation to new projects.

4 Consideration of New Projects

4.1 Croft walk Mellon Charles

Total project costs: £3225; WREN contribution £2000. **Approved, subject to:** satisfactory site visit from WREN mentor and confirmation of content, quantity and quality of proposed signs and interpretation; costs and quantities of path building; and source of appropriate plants for the various sites. Meryl Carr kindly agreed to act as WREN mentor to this project, and to advise them accordingly.

4.2 Inverasdale Pond

Total project costs: £1150 (max); WREN contribution £1050. **Approved, subject to:** satisfactory site visit from WREN mentor; reassurances over costs if additional days contractor input required; confirmation of appropriate public liability cover. PC pointed out that good pond design requires more than digging a hole. He volunteered to mentor this project on behalf of WREN, particularly to oversee the contractor's work and to advise on simple stocking of the pond. It was recommended that the work be done before end of March, in order to take advantage of current SEPA regulations involving changes to existing water-courses.

NW pointed out that although this project and the Croft Walk project are open access, the applicants are private businesses (crofts) and therefore strictly speaking the WREN contribution should be capped at 75%. She suggested that the applicant be asked to find ways of raising his contribution accordingly.

4.3 Marine Workshops

Total project costs: £3000; WREN contribution £3000. **Approved subject to:** a maximum contribution from WREN of 75%; confirmation from the applicant of suitable accommodation for each workshop should the new Marine Life centre not be completed on time; and confirmation from schools of the demand for the workshops. LG will continue to liaise with the applicant to ensure compliance with these requests.

4.4 Tarry Awhile

Total project costs: not clear; WREN contribution: not clear. **Decision deferred pending fuller costing details and re-application.** The overall project is likely to run into several thousands of pounds, maybe as much as £20,000. MC will continue to work with the applicant to determine true costs. KN said that SNH may be able to fund all or most of this project directly, perhaps leaving some element of it for WREN support, if necessary.

4.5 Life in the Lochans

Total project cost: £5200; WREN contribution: not clear. **Provisional approval** subject to identification of match-funding and/or project re-design. For instance, WREN could be asked to fund the preparation of life in the

lochans activity packs, while other funds are sought for the mobile ponds. LG will continue to liaise with the applicant on this project.

4.6 Wildlife Notice Board

4.7 Fishermen's Tales

4.8 Nature Walk Access

4.9 Strath Burn Restoration

These four projects had submitted late applications, and as the meeting had a significant amount of business to transact and was running out of time, it was agreed that decisions would be taken via email and a postal procedure. LG will prepare appraisal documents for each of these projects and circulate them amongst WREN members for comment and decision.

5. Report on LBAP Process

JW reported that Highland Council was in the process of agreeing a £20,000 contract to provide support to all Highland local groups to review the LBAPs and link them to regional and national plans. The contract would also assist with developing a major funding application for operation and project funds for the local groups

6. Report on Highland BAP Network

JW briefly explained the objectives for forming a Highland BAP Network (greater voice in highland-wide issues, greater chance to raise funds), and explained that a public agreement would be signed by all groups taking part, including WREN if it wished. There will be a Highland Biodiversity Forum meeting on 1st April to launch the Network.

7. AOCB

- LG handed out details of a seminar in Coylumbrige on 7th February to look at environment and learning.
- KN volunteered to help with judging and exhibiting the many entries we have received in the WREN schools art competition. It was agreed that at least the prize-winners should be exhibited, and it was suggested that Macphail centre has plenty of display space.
- Several people asked that we look for ways to encourage more people to join WREN
- Related to that was a request to get WREN involved in more activities in the area, either specialist events such as bird-watching days or general events such as Highland Games, at which we should have a presence. It was agreed that an events sub-group would be set up to look into these possibilities. LG pointed out that we have some money specifically designated for events.

8. Next meeting

Most people wanted to have another meeting before the summer got underway. Mid to late March is the best time for most people. AF and LG will confirm details nearer the time.