Minutes
of the
Fifteenth General Meeting
held on Friday, 26th November 2010 at 2.00 pm
at Breakish Hall,
Isle of Skye

__________________________

Present:
Chairman - James Merryweather (Independent), Secretary - David Ashford (Independent), Treasurer - Sarah Kay (Independent), Stephen Bungard (BSBI Recorder), Roger Cottis (Independent), John Phillips (Highland Council) and Jonathan Willet (Highland Council).

1. Apologies for absence:
Rule Anderson (National Trust for Scotland), Hazel Bews (Rowan Tree Consulting), Alan Drever (Independent), Barbara Macritchie (National Trust for Scotland), Alison MacLennan (RSPB), Chris Marsh (Forestry Commission Scotland), Sarah McGrory (SNH), Bob McMillan (Independent), Annabel Pendlebury (Sleat Community Trust), Cllr Audrey Sinclair (Highland Council), Janette Sutherland (Scottish Agricultural College) and Janet Ullman (Independent).

2. Minutes of the last meeting held on 17th February 2010.
Approved.

3. Matters arising from those Minutes not mentioned below.

   a) James Merryweather confirmed (i) he had informed the Wester Ross Environment Network of the existence of S&LEF’s sub-committee on mink and (ii) he had circulated copies of the Resurgence documents without any feedback but this may happen once they are on the website.

   b) Sarah Kay has applied to the Highland Councillors’ Discretionary Budget for assistance with the mink project.

   c) Invitations were circulated to Members regarding the “Lever & Mulch” demonstration day on 5th November 2009 which was very successful.

There were no other matters arising.

This took the form of a repeat of his presentation to the Biodiversity Forum (SNH, Inverness 13th March 2010) describing S&LEF progress
and lack thereof to that date.

5. Secretary’s Report.

David had none on this occasion.


Sarah Stephenson’s report was that £853.53 stands to the credit of the Bank account at present. £838.97 of that is restricted to the Japanese knotweed project. Thus S&LEF has only £14.56 in credit. She indicated that the Management Committee will be considering ways and means of solving this financial insecurity.

7. Projects - progress & funding:

John Phillips reported on the mink project and especially his surprise on discovering that the Eilean a’ Cheò Ward were unaware of the existence of mink on Skye. He and Roger Cottis are due to attend a meeting with the Ward Manager, Jan Laing, on 22nd February 2010 to tackle this problem. The possibility of assistance with core funding could perhaps be raised at the same time.

a) Website
b) Outreach
c) Japanese knotweed
d) Rhododendron ponticum
e) Mink

Given the huge costs incurred by the Hebridean Mink Project it is clear that S&LEF should focus on obtaining survey results at this stage.

Donald Macdonald suggested asking Community Councils to assist with surveys and Rule Anderson referred to mink rafts already in operation in parts of the National Trust for Scotland’s Balmacara estate which have revealed mink footprints.

John indicated the project will be publicised as widely as possible.

General comments:

The issue of how best to handle the Rowan Tree Consulting Report was discussed at length. James Merryweather advocated that S&LEF should not allow it to slow down progress with existing projects and especially the creation of a vision manifesto. However Jonathan Willet explained that it should be realised that the Report is to a certain extent generic given that the Consultants are visiting all Highland biodiversity groups. He felt there was much that was positive about the way it was constructed and that S&LEF will benefit from taking the advice given over time. James Merryweather’s concern about a lack of assistance with funding needs was not in Jonathan Willet’s opinion, justified. If priority projects are properly documented then the Consultants will work them into funding bids.

Sarah Kay expressed the frustration felt by Management Committee Members at the length of time it takes for the funding of projects to be secured. It was hoped that the Consultants would expedite a solution rather than place further hurdles on the paths which have taken about three years to create.

It was agreed that S&LEF needs to supply the Consultants with detailed costings and relevant information whereupon they would take the projects forward expeditiously. Annabel Pendlebury quoted from the Report by way of confirmation of this point.

James Merryweather added that if a project is being done by some
other biodiversity Highland group it would be wise to liaise to minimise the chances of being held back if that group is not so advanced.

Roger Cottis sounded a cautionary note in the case of the *Rhododendron ponticum* project which is part survey and part Lever & Mulch action. In his opinion there is no need for S&LEF’s progress to be delayed but agrees that feeding into the Council’s strategic control policy through its Rhododendron Officer would be beneficial. Roger emphasised the importance of establishing effective communication with other LBAP groups especially through websites given that annual Forums are not sufficient for sustainable networking. Jonathan took the view that it is a matter for the Members of the groups to decide but really more meetings would not be advisable. Instead making the issue of communication with other groups - a capacity building matter for the Consultants to consider - should be the way forward. James is to raise the issue in his talk at the forthcoming Biodiversity Forum.

Jonathan observed that it is clear that S&LEF is well advanced in project development. Therefore funding requirements should be prioritised in conjunction with the Consultants who are there to help. They would certainly appreciate the positive points James made in his analysis of their Report. It is for S&LEF to feed them with as much information as possible to assist their search for the appropriate funders.

8. The monitoring of biodiversity issues arising from Highland Council planning applications.

Roger Cottis suggested that a Volunteer to scan the Council’s electronic lists of planning applications with the aid of a digital map would be useful. He was instrumental in ensuring that such lists include grid references nowadays.

If the problem of tracking developments in sensitive areas, such as woodland, coastal or those close to burns, is to be resolved this could be critical. Having found a suspect application, the Volunteer would merely have to inform the Management Committee who would take the next cautionary steps. Roger Cottis has considerable experience of them and offered to give assistance to the Volunteer.

The process could benefit all parties concerned not least the developer who might otherwise be acting illegally given the extent of statutory constraints and European Directives. The emphasis will be on surveying the land well ahead of making any planning application with the resultant saving of time and money.

Stephen Bungard agreed to volunteer for limited periods of the year. Jonathan Willet spoke about a paper under consideration by the Council’s Planning Environment and Development Committee which could result in Roger Cottis’s biodiversity check list idea becoming a part of the standard planning application form. There are to be training days for planners and hopefully developers too in the months ahead. Thus the latter should become much more aware of their responsibilities for the protection of wildlife from thoughtless human
9. **AOCB.**

a) Annabel Pendlebury suggested that display boards at the May Armadale event would be beneficial if the cost of £25.00 (outdoor) is affordable. The Management Committee should discuss the idea. A gala day on Raasay in July is also a possible awareness opportunity. The Balmacara Day is in doubt this year.

b) With the Snares (Scotland) Order 2010 coming into force on 11th March 2010, Roger drew attention to the tightening of the law concerning the use of snares. He is seeking clarification of the wording of section 6 of the Order.

c) Sandra Holmes explained the remit of the Skye & Lochalsh Area Committee of the Scottish Crofting Federation of which she is Secretary and Donald Macdonald is Chairman. She foresees opportunities ahead for SCF and S&LEF to share information, ideas and education. In particular the encouragement of contact with respective Members of both organisations through the use of SCF’s publications should enhance much that they already have in common.

d) Jonathan Willet highlighted the potential of contact with the John Muir Trust in and around Elgol. They are active in trying to tackle *Rhododendron ponticum* and Japanese knotweed. Not since Douglas Halliday was a Member has S&LEF had a JMT representative. It was agreed this needs to be remedied.

e) Finally Jonathan Willet produced maps showing the whereabouts of non-native invasive species such as American mink, *Rhododendron ponticum* and Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed.

10. **DONM.** A date for the next General Meeting is to be arranged via the Management Committee using [www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com) as usual.

The meeting closed at 5.00 pm.