# HABITAT IMPACT ASSESSMENT

# Baseline data gathering

# 2016-2018

# For

# Lochalsh DMG



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On behalf of the Lochalsh DMG

# Contents

# 1.    Introduction

## 1.1    Background to the management of Deer and their Habitat

In 2013, the Scottish Government Rural Affairs Climate Change and Environment Committee (RACCE) undertook a review of Deer Management in Scotland. One of the recommendations of the Committee was that the deer sector should show that the voluntary basis of deer management should be 'fit for purpose' and it was recommended that this should be done by the end of 2016.

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), in partnership with numerous other rural organisations, had previously published a 'Code of Practice on Deer Management' which had come into effect on 1st January 2012. The Code is the foundation document for sustainable deer management in Scotland.

In 2014, a Deer Management Group (DMG) Benchmark was designed and published by SNH and the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) to help provide guidance to DMG's on how to assess and demonstrate its effectiveness in relation to the previously produced 'Code of Practice on Deer Management'.

As part of the benchmark criteria, it was considered by the ADMG and SNH that 'Effective Deer Management Plans' for each Deer Management Group would be the best way to demonstrate this 'fit for purpose' recommendation  outlined by RACCE and that those plans would be living plans that could evolve as management objectives changed over time.

Lochalsh DMG prepared and published their Deer Management Plan in 2016 and it can be found at www.lochalshdmg.deer-management.co.uk.

## 1.2    Lochalsh DMG Plan and Actions regarding Habitat Monitoring

Lochalsh DMG outlined a variety of actions in their 2016 published Deer Management Plan which they hoped would help the group achieve the 14 Benchmark Criteria prepared by ADMG/SNH.

Action 5 of the benchmark criteria related to monitoring and managing deer impacts in the wider countryside and it was considered by SNH/ADMG that one of the best ways to do this was to undertake a Habitat Monitoring Program. As a result Lochalsh DMG planned to begin Habitat Assessments in the summer of 2016.

It was intended that assessments would be done in early summer for the first three years (to provide good baseline data) and then every 3-5 years to monitor any changes. These assessments would follow the recommended process outlined by SNH. Please note the Forestry Commission land within the Deer Group would not be involved in this project as they carry out different monitoring due to the differing habitat within their property boundary.

## 2. Habitat Impact Assessment (HIA)

## 2.1 HIA Set up

Five main habitats were identified across the deer group by SNH. These were:

| Habitat | Area of DMG Habitat covers |
|---|---|
| Heather Moorland | 31133ha |
| Montane Vegetation | 8398ha |
| Blanket Bog | 2229ha |
| Woodland | 3366ha |
| Grassland | 3318ha |

For the benefit of a Habitat monitoring program, it was considered by SNH that the two key habitats to use were Blanket Bog and Dwarf Shrub Heath.

A large number of sites for each habitat was randomly selected by SNH and provided as grid reference points. These reference points were then transferred onto maps by the DMG staff members. As those grid references had not been ground tested by SNH (ie some points were in the middle of lochs once mapped), DMG staff members looked at the locations and using local knowledge of ground conditions randomly selected 44 suitable sites per habitat to be used for the assessments.

DMG staff members undertook on the ground HIA training with an SNH staff member prior to undertaking the Assessment work and Soren Hoejlund, a trained ecologist who works on Attadale Estate was also able to provide advice if required.

The DMG aimed to undertake the assessments of those sites in accordance with the guidelines recommended by SNH to ensure consistent data was gathered. Group members were to be provided with the same recording sheets and all the information, once gathered, was then to be given to Soren Hoejlund to summarise (refer to Appendix 1 for sample recording sheets and Appendix 2 for photos of site layouts).

Once the initial 3 years of data had been gathered the results were to be looked at and discussed at a group meeting and actions (if required) set to ensure that both the deer and the habitat would be sustainably managed in the future. The DMG would also ensure that data from assessments/reports and any associated actions discussed at DMG meetings would be recorded in the minutes and contained in future DMP updates.

## 2.2    HIA Initial Results

The group has undertaken the HIA of the same 44 sites for the first three consecutive years of the DMP to get a good baseline of data. The browsing impact for the sites has been recorded and has been shown in this report in table, graph and map format.

Browsing impact is split into a low, moderate or heavy classification. Low levels of browsing is considered to be up to 33% of long shoots browsed, Moderate browsing is considered to be 33-66% of long shoots browsed and Heavy browsing is considered to be more than 66% of long shoots browsed. This classification applies to both habitats.

The data results only represents the sites found across the group, however it is hoped that it is reflective of the situation across the whole group area. Members can only plan future actions based on data presented. Please note due to some issues in the first year of assessment, some of the data for DSH in 2016 could not be used so the results do not add up to 100%.

## 2.3    HIA Results as a table

Blanket Bog

| YEAR | Browsing Level as a % | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LOW | MODERATE | HEAVY | TOTAL |
| **2016** | 69 | 26 | 5 | 100 |
| **2017** | 87 | 8 | 5 | 100 |
| **2018** | 86 | 14 | 0 | 100 |

Dwarf Shrub Heath

| YEAR | Browsing Level as a % | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LOW | MODERATE | HEAVY | TOTAL |
| 2016 | 51 | 37 | 7 | 95 |
| 2017 | 69 | 21 | 10 | 100 |
| 2018 | 69 | 26 | 5 | 100 |

The standard impact target for both habitats (as noted by SNH) to achieve a sustainable habitat is that 90% of survey samples are found in the Low to Moderate/Low Range. As can be seen from the tables above, each year the samples do achieve at least 90% in the Low to Moderate/Low Range.

## 2.4    HIA Results as a graph

Blanket Bog
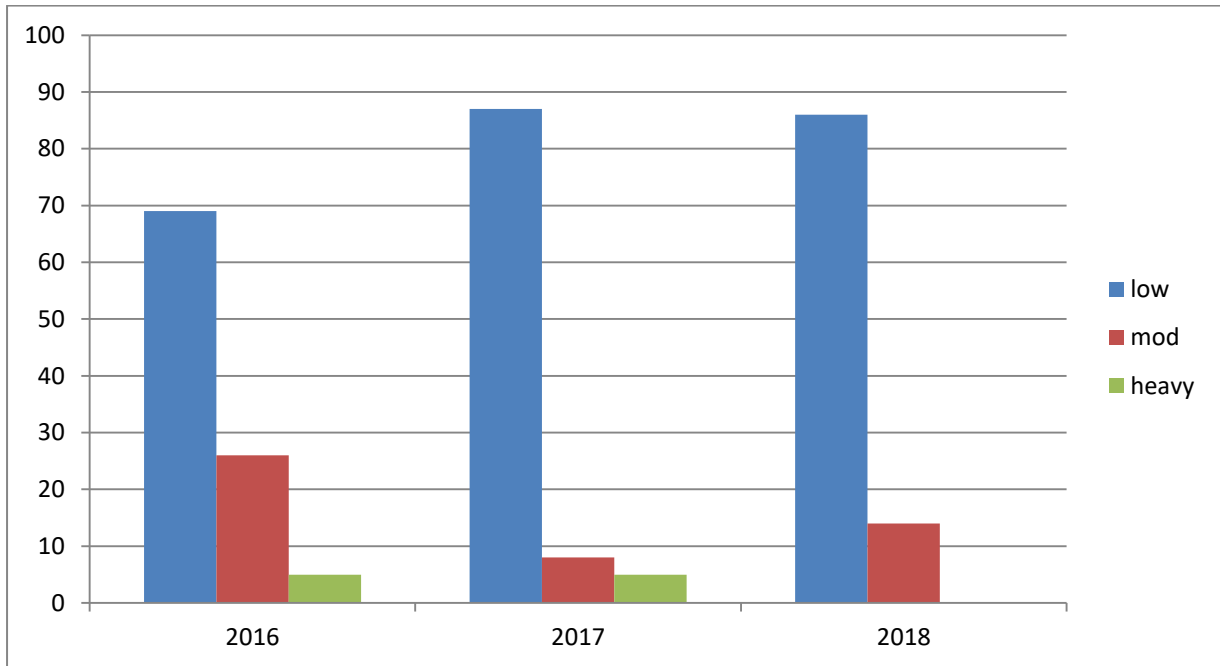


Dwarf Shrub Heath
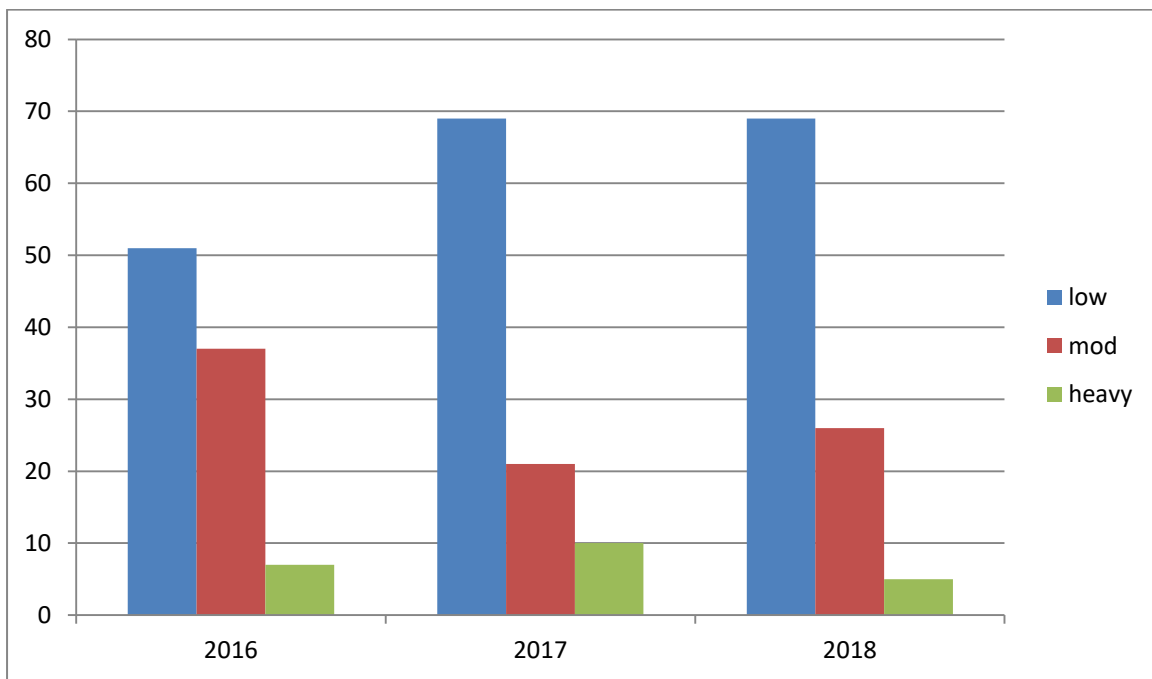
## 2.5    HIA Results mapped

Soren Hoejlund has also mapped all the results. A map was produced for Dwarf Shrub Heath and for Blanket Bog for each of the past three years. Each assessment site is represented by a symbol and the colour represents the level of browsing impact for that year. Green represents low browsing, yellow represents moderate browsing and red represents high browsing.  Please refer to Appendix 3 for the maps.

## 3.0    Conclusion

The Lochalsh DMG has undertaken three years of Habitat Impact Assessment with sites for the two key habitats spread across the group. This has provided a good level of baseline data. The group will now discuss the results at their 2019 summer meeting and decide what actions, if any, are required to ensure the long term sustainability of the habitat within the group. Further re-assessments of the same sites will take place ever 3-5 years.