



## The All Party Parliamentary Group on

### Game and Wildlife Conservation

#### Minutes

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2019  
12:30pm -13:30pm  
Jubilee Room, Westminster Hall

#### Attending:

Name	Representing	Name	Representing
Sir Nicholas Soames	MP	Ian Coghill	BASC
Baroness Young of Old Scone	House of Lords	Rob Yorke	
Duke of Montrose	House of Lords	Charlie Pye-Smith	
Baroness Byford	House of Lords	Abi Kay	Farmers Guardian
Lord Blencathra	House of Lords		
Lauren Shotter	POST Fellow	<b>Guest speakers</b>	
Prof Andrew C Scott	Royal Holloway	Simon Thorp	England & Wales Wildfire Forum
Steve Bray	MoD Fire & Rescue Service	Professor Rob Marris	University of Liverpool
Sam Ashby	Home Office	Clifton Bain	IUCN UK Peatland Programme
Andy Elliott	FRS Wildfire Tactical Advisor	<b>GWCT</b>	
David Middleton	Defra	Teresa Dent	GWCT
Amanda Anderson	Moorland Assoc	Adam Smith	GWCT
Marquess of Downshire	Moorland Assoc	Joel Holt	GWCT
Rob Gazzard	FC	Jen Brewin	GWCT
Bruce Farquharson	Fire Scotland	James Swyer	GWCT
Adam Barnett	RSPB	Sir Jim Paice	GWCT
Pat Thompson	RSPB		
Jack Knott	Countryside Alliance		
James Somerville-Meikle	Countryside Alliance		

#### Minutes:

Sir Nicholas, who chaired the meeting, began by explaining that a statement by the Prime Minister at 12.30 would prevent other MPs attending. He then provided a brief introduction to the topic by highlighting the fact that 2018 was a bad wildfire year throughout the UK and that such incidents will occur more frequently as our climate becomes warmer.

The first speaker was Professor Rob Marris (RM) from the School of Environmental Sciences at Liverpool University. Rob began by emphasising that there are common ambitions amongst interested parties, namely good peat growth and sustainable moorlands; the differences lie in the approach to achieving these aims. He argued that prescribed burning has a role in mitigating wildfire as it reduces the fuel load, improves access for firefighting and should allow faster recovery of the vegetation. Therefore whilst prescribed burning will cause some short term perturbation to the environment, the risks to the overall conservation effort of not managing the heather are

greater, as allowing significant fuel loads to amass will result in the scale and severity of wildfire experienced last year.

He was followed by Clifton Bain (CB) from the IUCN UK Peatland Programme. Clifton felt that the dialogue surrounding wildfire had been confused by the incorrect use of terminologies. Moorland is a generic term for uncultivated uplands whilst peatlands are sphagnum moss dominated uplands with >30cms of peat soil and heathlands are free draining areas dominated by short woody shrubs (generally heather). Like Rob Marrs, he highlighted the fact that our peatlands have been the subject of hundreds of years of management. Consequently many of our peatlands are severely degraded, 'dry' peatlands which are not functioning correctly and so are susceptible to fire damage. Wet peatlands are fire resistant. The key, therefore, is to restore degraded peatland to recover functions such as carbon storage and biodiversity.

Clifton argued that re-wetting peatland and allowing the natural recovery of the ecosystem without burning is the most successful approach to restoration as even a prescribed fire can set back peat forming species. He emphasised the need for good fire management systems to be in place and argued that non-burning methods could be used to reduce wildfire risk such as cutting as well as improved education to increase awareness of wildfire risks to recovering peatlands. He also called for more extensive research into methods for assessing impacts of fire on peatland, burn and no-burn restoration techniques and the need for long term monitoring across a range of peatland sites.

The final speaker was Simon Thorp (ST) of the England & Wales Wildfire Forum. Simon emphasised the need for a cohesive strategy in order to reduce the risk of wildfires. Within Government there are 3 different departments involved in wildfire policy – the Home Office which oversees the fire service; Defra which leads on habitat management; and, the Cabinet Office which leads on resilience. These departments are not working cohesively; we need an integrated Government approach. Simon also called for improved funding (to date much of the work has been done voluntarily by interested parties) and the need for an effective warning system. Wildfires are not just limited to the Summer; there were wildfires in Scotland, Wales and NW England at the time of the meeting.

Wildfire should not be seen as a Fire Service problem; mitigation is important. That said the Fire Service has significantly improved its response capability based on wildfire operational guidance, improved training based on international experience and the introduction of Wildfire Tactical Advisors in 2018. However these improvements need to be matched by the land management sector to improve mitigation. This will require a bold initiative to remove barriers and consider an approach to land management that balances conservation and wildfire mitigation ambitions. Fire groups exist in many areas and have an important role to play in preparing for wildfire and coordinating responses.

Simon finished by outlining his 4 requirements for wildfire mitigation:

1. Integrated support from Government – consider development of a Wildfire Strategy
2. Warning of wildfire high risk conditions - develop UK Fire Danger Rating System.
3. Risk assessment approach by land managers to mitigating impact of wildfire – work with Fire Groups and local resilience structures to develop Wildfire Management and Response Plans.
4. Develop and implement guidance for wildfire mitigation on open land – managed & unmanaged.

## Q&A session

This was chaired by Sir Nicholas who introduced the session by stating that in answer to a question posed by him in July 2018 to Defra on the trigger points on the Fire Severity Index, it was clear that it was structured in such a way that level 5 (open access rights are only suspended when conditions become exceptional ie. level 5) cannot be reached.

Professor Andrew Scott, a specialist in wildfire, commenced the Q&A by emphasising the costs involved – the Californian wildfire budget is half the US forestry budget. He also spoke of ‘fire switches’ which are where the risks of wildfire significantly increase as climate changes and that the risk of wildfire is not related to size but location. He emphasised the lack of understanding and education and that we couldn’t afford to wait until disaster strikes before acting.

Ian Coghill (BASC) queried the validity of a no-burn policy given the costs of wildfire as demonstrated by the Saddleworth Moor fire in 2018. RM repeated his view that prescribed burning has a role to play given that in some areas the growth rate of heather is very fast whilst CB said there was no generic solution with managed burning more acceptable on heathlands than peatlands. Re-wetting peatlands provides a natural break and burning is a threat to the recovery of the peatland.

Amanda Anderson (Moorland Association) queried the recovery timescale given the threat of climate change to the cold and wet conditions blanket bog requires. CB responded that most of the blanket bogs were recovering within an acceptable timescale and that blanket bogs had survived warm periods in the past with research showing that the moss species composition changed. ST added that blanket bog was only part of the story and that mitigation plans targeted to the vegetative composition of individual areas are important.

Pat Thompson (RSPB) enquired about the development of a warning system. ST said that it was a concept at this stage being based on the Canadian system and adapted for the UK. Bruce Farquharson (Fire Scotland) said that a danger rating system was being developed in Scotland that would be applicable UK wide and Professor Scott added that NERC has a grant call out on this at the moment.

Duke of Montrose asked if there was a point during peatland restoration at which the heather growth would need management due to the fuel load being created. CB said that it took 5-10 years for mosses to become dominant and that during that time sensible fire management precautions were required. He repeated his view that more scientific research is required to explore this.

Teresa Dent (GWCT) pointed out that in 2007 Defra had highlighted wildfire as being the 2<sup>nd</sup> risk to peatland restoration and therefore mitigation strategies are critical given the investment in restoration. She added that any strategy needed to make use of the expertise available.

Rob Yorke queried whose role it was to increase awareness of wildfire. Sir Nicholas said that the Fire Services were very proactive and Andy Elliott (a wildfire tactical advisor with Dorset & Wiltshire FRS) added that at the moment 16 wildfires were being monitored but only a few were flagged in the Press. However there is no formal fire warning system yet with the Fire Severity Index run by the Met Office only an aide. CB felt that the different land management sectors needed to agree a common narrative and that the lack of robust science had led to an inconsistent message and

approach. The need for long term strategic studies with supporting funding was also emphasised by RM.

Sir Nicholas concluded the discussion at 13.40 by thanking the speakers and attendees for a fascinating debate on a topic of national importance. He suggested that a note from the meeting should be sent to the Home Office/Defra to take the narrative forward and emphasise the need for a cohesive strategy.

28<sup>th</sup> February 2019