Supplementary written submission from the John Muir Trust

Deer management at Ardvar

We note that the John Muir Trust were discussed during the meeting of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee on the 30th September 2015 in relation to deer management provisions in the draft Land Reform Bill and specifically in relation to the ongoing discussions surrounding the Ardvar woodland.

As the John Muir Trust were not invited to give evidence, we would be most grateful for the chance to respond to some of the points made, and for our response to be circulated to committee members.

The key point (not mentioned in your committees discussion of the issue) is that the Ardvar woodlands are a national (SSSI) and international (SAC) designated site – one of the most protected pieces of land in Scotland. They have been determined by SNH as being in ‘unfavourable condition’ due to deer damage since 2004. The recently reviewed Wild Deer a National Approach published in 2015 by the Scottish Government clearly states (p 7): ‘Where resolving tensions between priorities at a local level is not possible and Government involvement is needed, this intervention will prioritise maintaining healthy ecosystems.’ The crux of the issue, therefore, is not about ‘competing land management objectives’ as was stated by some of those giving evidence, but is about the importance Scotland places on its internationally protected nature conservation sites.

Eleven years on and the damage to the woodlands is still continuing. It is highly likely to continue this winter unless SNH reverse their refusal to issue close season authorisations to prevent deer damage. Close season culling is standard deer management practice in most woodlands (e.g. those managed by the state in the form of Forest Enterprise) and designated woodland sites throughout Scotland.

Robbie Kernahan gave evidence about the success of the Breadalbane and Caenlochan Section 7s where deer populations have been reduced “…from twelve / thirteen thousand to eight…” and “…from just over twelve thousand to five thousand…” respectively without the use of fencing. By contrast, at Ardvar, SNH’s current proposals for a Section 7 is for the deer density to stay at the same damaging level and for hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money to be spent on deer fences to protect sporting interests.

More specifically you stated that the John Muir Trust was not prepared to consider a Land Management Order that includes fencing. For the record, in our letter to you and your committee of 19th June we stated that the previous Environment Minister Paul Wheelhouse had agreed that ‘JMT could only consider fencing proposals on the designated site if these were presented alongside a deer management plan and a Section 7 agreement’. This remains our view. We have indicated to SNH that we are willing to attempt to negotiate a Section 7 agreement.

Yours sincerely

Stuart Brooks, Chief Executive