**Response to Capercaillie Emergency Plan from Nick Kempe**

1. **Resources**

The requirement for a fundraising strategy speaks volumes, the Scottish Government is not even prepared to spend £3m on saving a species that has identified as iconic to Scotland. The requirement to fundraise will divert lots of project management time to chasing money instead of making a practical difference to capercaillie on the ground.

At the same time the strategy contains no mention of the need for cross compliance. Landowners who damage habitats that are crucial to capercaillie or do things that are proven to harm them (most notably erect deer fencing) should not receive other public subsidies/public funding.  Such cross-compliance is actually far more important than fundraising.  For example, the strategy includes £500k to remove deer fencing when far more than this been provided by public agencies to erect deer fencing in core capercaillie areas on Speyside, e.g. Scottish Forestry’s grants to BrewDog’s Lost Forest, Muckrach and Far Ralia or Forest Research's fenced enclosures in the MacAlpine Plantation in Glen More.

1. **List of stakeholders.**

The draft strategy states the list includes all landowners where capercaillie are found. However, my understanding is that there have been no on Mar Lodge for several years and there are several other landholdings that come into this category including some that the strategy says has no caper e.g. Abergeldie.  If the list is intended to include landholdings where there is a reasonable likelihood that capercaillie might disperse, it should say so and include estates that are not included in the list at present, such as BrewDog, Muckrach and Far Ralia.

1. **Woodland expansion.**

The draft strategy contains a commitment to identify areas for woodland expansion that would most benefit the capercaillie without any reference to the type of woodland (including species of tree) or how such woodland should be established.  One of the key factors that is likely to have contributed to the decline in capercaillie has been the change in species composition of forestry plantations, from Scots pine to Sitka and the increasing use of drainage – so woodland expansion, if of the wrong type, could actually be detrimental to the capercaillie.  Adam Watson provided extensive evidence about the TYPE of woodland that capercaillie favour in his book Grouse but his research appears to have been neglected subsequently because it does not suit the forest industry.

The Strategy should acknowledge that much of the woodland in Strathspey is Caledonian pinewood, and nothing should be done that damages the potential for natural regeneration within the regeneration and buffer zones as defined by the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory.  Ideally natural regeneration should be the sole process for woodland expansion throughout the national park.  Planting of all tree species is the most damaging practice that has been carried out and is currently being carried out in the park.  The lack of a seed source argument – referred to in the strategy as a justification for planting - is overplayed for pine, birch and rowan, all of which disperse readily by wind or birds (rowan).  Deer have been the limiting factor preventing woodland expansion on both Strathspey and Deeside.

Given the lethal nature of deer fencing to capercaillie, even when marked, there is no point in trying to create new woodland by fencing, as proposed in the strategy, as it likely to kill more capercaillie than are helped by new habitat.    The idea of limited seed source, which is used in the strategy to justify planting, is a myth. The potential for natural regeneration of the Caledonian pinewoods in both Strathspey and Deeside is immense but has been prevented high deer densities which need to be reduced from the target levels set in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and National Park Partnership Plan to 2 per square km or less.

It is also important to note that the overall amount of woodland is not the only limiting factor for capercaillie, it is also how that woodland is structured.  Given that around a hundred capercaillie were shot each year in Abernethy in the 1930s, the population must have been around 500 to sustain that level of hunting.  A potential explanation for this is that the number of tracks through the forest has increased, increasing the amount of woodland edge, which is favoured by many predators and increasing the proportion of the woodland that is likely to be disturbed by dogs.

1. **Woodland Grazing, Robocutting etc.**

These are basically gardening interventions and the strategy fails to explain why capercaillie numbers were so much higher when land managers were not doing these things?  Perhaps there used to be lots of cattle grazing in Scots Pine plantations where capercaillie are now extinct??

It would be good to see the evidence for whether robocutting on a grand scale improves the breeding success of capercaillies, if that is the aim.  There are reasons to be sceptical. A trial in the 2000s, involving the swiping of 2 m wide tracks through 400 ha of woodland - heather was targeted - failed to improve capercaillie breeding success when compared with a control area.  I have been informed that breeding success is now being based on photographs of females with chicks, though this is an unproven method compared to lek counts. If the aim of robocutting is primarily to enhance blaeberry cover, the only study that has examined the relationship between capercaillie breeding success and blaeberry cover, showed that breeding success did not improve further once blaeberry cover exceeded around 15% of the woodland floor: most of the woods where capercaillie are still found exceed that

There are therefore some fairly fundamental questions that need to be addressed before too much effort and resources are devoted to such schemes.

1. **Forest bog restoration.**

Blocking drains is a sensible action - in line with Adam Watson's observations about drier pine woods being bad for caper chicks - but the fact that the Strategy is looking for Peatland Action to fund blocking drains, most of which were paid for by public grants in the first place, speaks volumes about the likely success of a fundraising strategy aiming to extract money for landowners.  Cross compliance would be a far better strategy: no grants unless drains are blocked.

1. **Diversionary feeding.**

The recent research on FLS land which showed diversionary feeding during the breeding period reduced egg predation is very interesting as FLS seems very aware of the risks of predator populations increasing if such diversionary feeding was carried on for lengthy periods. The suggestion that diversionary feeding is most justified when populations of voles –an important food source for many predators – seems right.

The plan, however, omits two crucial issues. First, diversionary feeding is not natural and the resources required to implement it considerable (identifying capercaillie nests, working out where to place the food etc). Second, there is now widespread feeding of pine marten by the public – who use food to attract them for viewing purposes – and that is likely to have increased their populations. The more food and the greater their population density, the more likely it is that capercaillie nests will be found and predated. Given all the attention that has been given to the alleged impact of recreational disturbance of capercaillie, it is strange there has been no mention of feeding. The plan should contain an action point to educate the public about the consequences of feeding pine marten.

1. **Enhanced fox and crow control.**

The data suggests that this is unlikely to be important factor in increasing capercaillie survival rates, although sporting estates have used this to justify predator control more generally. Again, the important point has been missed - something Adam Watson again pointed out in relation to the Cairngorms plateau.  People leaving food litter, putting food out for birds that is then taken by foxes etc, may be artificially boosting these populations and it would be better to address that issue.

1. **Fence removal.**

Of all the factors affecting the capercaillie population, the one that has been shown to have most impact is collisions with deer fencing.   Fences kill and if they were removed the caper population would be in an entirely different position.  While the Emergency Plan cites comments from the GWCT stating this, the actions contained in the plan are totally inadequate to deal with the problem.

While the plan refers to the fences which were removed or marked by the capercaillie project, it does not refer to all the new deer fences that have gone up in caper dispersal areas (not just those cited above on Speyside but all over Deeside too). It appears likely that far more fences were erected in capercaillie dispersal areas than were removed during the lifetime of the project. That should be a public scandal. The cause of the problem is two-fold: the failure to control deer numbers, which have increased since the 1990s, accompanied by readily available public subsidies for fencing.  At the very least the Plan should be committing Scottish Forestry, FLS, Nature Scot and the National Park Authority to follow the lead of Glen Feshie, Glenmore and Abernethy and erect NO new deer fences in the National Park while setting targets for the length of fence to be removed each year.  That will require deer numbers to be addressed.

1. **Reducing disturbance.**

From the plan it is very unclear what the CNPA and NatureScot think the disturbance problem is and what is actually proposed - apart from dogs which clearly do disturb caper as they are much better than finding them than humans (and it appears from the RSPB's experience even when trained can kill chicks).  There is no evidence that a reduction in human disturbance per se, will in itself improve breeding success, and any further research on this would benefit from starting with y a survey of historical sources about caper, black grouse etc living in proximity to humans. What is far more important than temporary disturbance, is how activities that disturb whether carried out in the name of land-management or outdoor recreation can reduce the amount of habitat available to capercaillie: its not the excavator trundling or the mountain biker speeding along the forest road that we should be concerned about, it’s the road and the extent of the road network.

1. **Research.**

There are serious questions to be asked about the research priorities: for example, given the proven impact of deer fencing there is a much stronger case for researching the impact of stock fencing of capercaillie and other birds – that would mean paying researchers to walk fences daily for a season – than in trying to monitor the pine marten population which is unlikely to do anything to protect the capercaillie, given martens are also protected species. It is not stated how marten numbers are to be monitored but scat counting, besides being labour intensive, is not a great method.

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