



## **Minutes of the 67<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust**

**WWT Martin Mere Wetland Centre**

**2 October 2014 at 10:30am**

**The following members of the Council were present, together with more than 70 WWT members and staff:**

Sir George Russell CBE (Chairman), Leslie Jones OBE, Peter Day, Sir Graham Fry, Barnaby Briggs, Philip Duncan, Anna Carragher, Simon Tonge

The Chairman, Sir George Russell, welcomed all to the 67th Annual General Meeting of WWT, taking place at WWT Martin Mere in its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year, and he thanked all staff and volunteers who have supported the Centre throughout this period. He noted that the last three years had been a remarkable period for the organisation, despite austerity improvements had been achieved on every site. Much progress had been made in research work, in moving forward working wetlands initiatives, and world-wide acknowledgement had been received. He congratulated staff on what they have achieved.

### **1. Apologies for absence were received from:**

HRH The Prince of Wales KG, KT, GCB (President), Dafila Scott, Alastair Driver, Andy Brown.

### **2. Minutes of the 66th Annual General Meeting**

Comments were invited on the minutes of the 66th Annual General Meeting. No comments were received and the minutes were agreed and signed by the Chairman as a true record.

### **3. Matters arising from the Minutes**

There were no matters arising.

#### **4. Elections to Council**

The Chairman reported that Leslie Jones, Treasurer, and Peter Day, Andy Brown and Simon Tonge had been elected for a further year.

#### **5. To receive and consider the Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 and the Report of the Auditors thereon.**

##### **Report of the Hon. Treasurer**

The Hon Treasurer referred to the Consolidated Statement of Financial Activities, SOFA, contained in the Annual Report for the 12-month period ending 31 March 2014. He noted that it was a good set of results. Income was £24.4m compared with £17m the previous year. There had been two windfall areas: it had been a very good year for legacies at £3.7m as opposed to £1.7m the previous year, and in addition the Trust had received a large VAT refund from HMRC.

The VAT refund was due to WWT gaining cultural exemption for seven of our reserves because they are classified as zoos. The Hon Treasurer extended his thanks to the Finance team for their hard work to bring about this ruling. The matter had gone to tribunal and the Hon Treasurer thanked David Milne QC, who sits on the Trust's Finance & General Purposes Committee, who had represented the Trust, and Kevin Peberdy who had acted as expert witness.

Expenditure for the year was £19m. The year had seen a continuing programme of improvements to centres, a continuation of the Conservation programmes, and business as usual across the range of Trust activities. The Pension deficit had gone down.

The Hon. Treasurer noted that without the legacies and VAT windfall, there was still the underlying challenge of a running deficit in day-to-day operations, but that the organisation was in a good position going forward to become more sustainable. He noted that the windfall will be spent on the continuing programme of capital developments. He asked for questions.

A question was received from the floor as to how long will it take for the pension deficit to be cleared entirely.

The Hon Treasurer responded that the FRS17 evaluation is only a snapshot in time. The pension scheme closed in 1997, the deficit had gone down this year, but there are many factors that affect it including longevity and markets. It is estimated that it will take 19 years to clear, with a contribution of c £250k per year, which had been agreed with Pensions Regulator.

**The receipt of the Annual Report and Financial Statements was proposed by Mr Peter Wallis and seconded by Mr Roger Schofield. Members voted to accept receipt.**

#### **6. To re-appoint Messrs. Mazars of Beaufort Buildings, Clifton, Bristol BS8 4AN, as auditors and to authorise Council to agree their remuneration.**

Re-appointment of the auditors was proposed by Mr Colin Andrews, seconded by Mr David Wilkins and the vote was carried.

## **7. Questions raised prior to the meeting.**

Members had been requested to submit questions before the AGM, five had been received and these appear below, together with the responses:

### **From Mr AG Foulds:**

**A request please for a reduction in fee for one guest, this is partly offset by use of the cafe, plus the goodwill engendered.**

Due to HMRC guidelines, we are restricted on the value of benefits we can offer members whilst continuing to claim gift aid on membership fees (worth 25p for every £1). At present we issue six vouchers to all members on purchase and renewal of the membership, these offer a discount at the group rate to the bearer, which equates to between 10 and 15% discount on admissions.

### **From Mrs PM Weston:**

**Fracking and the possible problem with surface water and maybe our migratory birds.**

Fracking has the potential to pollute our water and disturb wildlife such as wildfowl. As such we are calling for Government to put in place a robust framework to minimise the environmental impact of fracking. This should include the avoidance of fracking in and close to protected areas as well as particularly vulnerable habitats such as chalk streams. More details on this can be found in a report WWT co-published with a number of other NGOs called *Are we fit to frack?* Regarding fracking proposals in the Martin Mere area, we believe any disturbance to migratory birds might be mitigated through planning restrictions – eg on time of year for certain works – but more research would first be needed to ascertain how useful that might be. We are yet to see any evidence of potential surface water issues at Martin Mere but so far drilling has been in a different catchment. We are keeping a close eye on developments. We also feel it is important that, rather than focussing on fracking, the country should be focussing on clean, renewable energy which will help the UK meet its climate change targets and solve the country's long term energy needs.

### **From the Rev. S Fairbairn:**

**Why are there so many empty pens at Martin Mere at present?**

We have been rationalising the captive collection and exhibits at Martin Mere through collection planning and development planning exercises, which along with a reduction in the number of birds have led to improved animal welfare and husbandry standards.

Some of the exhibits are old and in need of redevelopment and we feel can't take birds at the moment – we apologise if signage hasn't explained that and we will address that deficit.

We have recently redeveloped a large area in the Walk on the Wildside exhibits and are due, in 2015, to embark on more exciting exhibit development – in the old 'North American pen'. Ultimately the large 'outer loop' will be emptied of captive bird exhibits.

We have used some formerly empty pens to house temporary exhibits i.e. coscoroba swans, black-bellied whistling ducks and we will soon be exhibiting bronze-winged ducks in a recently emptied pen (where the Andean geese were adjacent to the South American lake). Barnacle and red-breasted geese now occupy the formerly empty 'African pen'.

**From Mr N Riley:**

**Can you confirm that swan ringing will continue in the foreseeable future?**

WWT are at the forefront of swan conservation. We will continue to ring whooper and Bewick's swans as part of our ongoing research.

**From Mr D Wilkins:**

**Your opinion please on Natural England's proposal to put greylag geese on general licence. Was WWT involved in discussions?**

We responded to Natural England's consultation on changes to general and class licences. We opposed the proposal to add greylag geese to the general licence. We're concerned that there's too much risk that the similar looking, but far more endangered, white-fronted geese will be mistakenly shot. Both European and Greenland white-fronted geese are red listed species of conservation concern. Under general licence no monitoring, reporting or compliance is required, so it could be a real threat to the white-fronted geese.

We believe any control of greylag geese should account for some of the species being migratory and some being resident and breeding in the UK. Under general licence there is no closed season, or the ability to vary constraints by geographical location, so the general licence is in our opinion not the right tool to control greylag geese in England.

## **8. Long Service Awards**

The Chairman noted that Amanda Richardson – Supporter Manager, Slimbridge; John Arbon – Grounds and Facilities Manager, London Wetland Centre; David Simms – Craftsman, Llanelli; Richard Edwards – Reserve Manager, Llanelli, are to be awarded gifts of their choice in recognition of their 25 years' service with the Trust. None wished for a formal presentation at this meeting and arrangements are being made for them to receive their gifts in due course.

## **9. Chief Executive's address and staff presentations**

The Chief Executive referred to the 2013 State of Nature Report for England – WWT had been one of 25 organisations who had contributed. The report shows that 60% of species in the country are in decline. The just-published Living Planet report showed a decline across the world of 50%. He stressed that it was important to look for positive solutions, and that this approach is the essence of the organisation. We have the skills, knowledge, experience, confidence, ambition to provide those sorts of solutions. He added that his ambition for the organisation is that it continues to grow so that we can become a major player in helping to turn those statistics around.

He highlighted areas of work, as follows:

Internationally: We have applied to become an independent organisational partner of the Ramsar Convention (the first global conservation convention, written by Sir Peter Scott), and are hopeful that the application will be ratified next year.

Species work internationally: The Spoon-billed Sandpiper Programme is a major flagship programme highlighting the problems affecting the East Asian flyway, one of the most important migratory flyways in the world. This year the captive population were showing signs of breeding but it did not take place, however it is hopeful that they will breed next year. We have carried out headstarting in Russia, at the same time are working with partners in the flyway partnership to try and address some of the problems of that flyway.

Madagascar Pochard: We are now breeding them, and have quadrupled the population. We have found a lake which will be a suitable site for reintroduction and are seeking funds to take this work forward, working with local populations.

Animal Health Work: Dr Ruth Cromie has been involved in producing a wetland disease manual which has been adopted by Ramsar and will be used across the world by its members.

Great Crane Project: 81 birds have now been released on the Somerset levels. Signs of breeding this year but unfortunately failed due to predation.

The Chief Executive also commended the work done by Centres in connecting people with nature. One aspect which is proving particularly successful is the Inspiring Generations programme, funded by HSBC, bringing schoolchildren from deprived areas to our centres. He also spoke of the WWT nature reserves, which are internationally significant and produce wonderful wildlife spectacles.

He stressed the need to work with local communities, making the living environment relevant to people's lives, and touched on the launch of the Working Wetlands Programme which will bring benefits to people at the same time as providing wildlife havens.

Staff then gave presentations as follows:

- Andy Graham, Head of Wetlands for People, on the Sarus Crane Project in Cambodia, and its benefits for people and their livelihoods in the region.
- Peter Cranswick, Head of Species Recovery, on the Red-Breasted Goose Project and the trials and tribulations of fieldwork undertaken, often in extreme conditions, for this project.
- Sacha Dench on media, with particular focus on opportunities arising from the use of new technology.
- Tim McGrath on the Steart Marshes programme, the largest wetland habitat creation scheme in the UK, which will benefit both people and wildlife.

#### 10. **Chairman's address – end of formal meeting**

The Chairman officially closed the meeting at 13.00