AEWA Eurasian Curlew International Working Group
Establishment of an adaptive harvest management process for the Eurasian Curlew ssp. *Numenius a. arquata*

18 September 2019, Paris, France

Meeting Minutes

1. Opening of the meeting

Sergey Dereliev/AEWA Secretariat and Francois Lamarque/French Ministry for the Ecological and Inclusive Transition opened the meeting and welcomed participants.

2. Adoption of the agenda

Decision: The annotated agenda (Doc. EC IWG AHM 1.1) was adopted.

3. Admission of observers

Decision: All observers present were admitted to the meeting (Doc. EC IWG AHM Inf. 1.6).

4. Overview on the status of the Eurasian Curlew ssp. *Numenius a. arquata*

The Coordinator of the AEWA Eurasian Curlew International Working Group Daniel Brown of RSPB provided an update of the current status of the sub-species *Numenius a. arquata*, including an overview of the progress made in various countries since the Action Plan was adopted in terms of enhanced conservation and research effort.

Discussion:

Finland added that in their revised national Red List published in 2019, the Eurasian Curlew is now ranked as Near-Threatened. Although there has been a slight increase within protected areas, elsewhere the species has declined. Wetlands International noted the latest population estimate for the sub-species *Numenius a. arquata* to be 636,000-876,000 individuals (AEWA Conservation Status Report, 7th edition).

The UK reported the latest official estimate for its Curlew population as 59,000 breeding pairs (absolute maximum, likely an overestimate), and noted some sub-populations within the country to be in a more perilous state than others – particularly in Southern England - and inquired whether other countries have data on the same kind of geographic variance. Brown noted that data does exist, and that this variance is probably mainly linked to differences in land management and disappearance of suitable habitat. Brown added that parts of Ireland seem suitable for Curlews but are for some reason completely devoid of the species. Sweden concurred that the species breeds in very different habitats across the country, but also noted that part of the recovery of the population is the need to not only increase numbers where Curlews still exist, but also where they are missing, i.e. in their historical range.

Germany confirmed that there is a huge variation in the distribution of Curlews within Germany with a large proportion of the birds found in the North-West – whereas in some southern parts of the country, they are barely hanging on. Germany added that in Lower Saxony, for example, they breed in completely different habitats (SPAs and beyond), often exhibiting high breeding site fidelity and returning to areas which are no longer suitable.

OMPO requested further information regarding the large discrepancy in numbers between the breeding and wintering populations and noted the need for better data from outside of Europe, particularly from Russia. Wetlands International explained the various weaknesses in the mid-winter counts, including a possible shift in the distribution of Curlews due to climate change which may be compensating for the observed decline in the wintering areas traditionally monitored. Calculating the population estimate and trend based on breeding pairs is therefore considered more reliable.

5. Legal provisions under AEWA

Dereliev/AEWA Secretariat presented the current legal status of the Eurasian Curlew sub-species *Numenius a. arquata* under the provisions of the Agreement, whereby as the Europe/Europe, North & West Africa population is listed on Annex 3, Table 1 of the Agreement in Column A, Category 4, hunting may continue on a sustainable use basis, by way of an exception (AEWA Action Plan, Annex 3, paragraph 2.1.1). This sustainable use shall be conducted within the framework of an international species action plan, through which Parties will implement adaptive harvest management.

Discussion:

Germany and the Netherlands questioned the need for the establishment of an adaptive harvest management process for the Curlew, in light of the anticipated high additional costs for range states related to monitoring etc. and noting that many of the breeding range states are investing heavily in the conservation of wet meadow breeding waders (several million euros annually). Any hunting in the winter range of Curlews that breed in Germany or the Netherlands might endanger these efforts. The outcome of any adaptive harvest management process must not counteract these conservation efforts, as outlined in Article 7(1) of the EU Birds Directive.

Dereliev replied that the decision to establish an adaptive harvest management process for the sub-species was taken at AEWA MOP6 and included in the AEWA Eurasian Curlew ISSAP (Action 3.1.1), further noting adequate monitoring of the population to be a general obligation for all range states as set out in the ISSAP. Monitoring data is needed to inform the ongoing conservation work and is not just linked to a possible adaptive harvest management process. At present there is no scientific process or data to inform the adaptive harvest management of the population, yet a science-based conservation approach is essential to justify any decisions that are taken. The Secretariat therefore sees the necessity to launch the adaptive harvest management process.

The UK shared the concerns expressed by the Netherlands and Germany but added that all range states should have an interest in achieving a better understanding of the population dynamics and migration and therefore to engage in the first step of the process.

FACE commented that European and French hunters are very concerned about the conservation status of the Curlew but are also concerned that hunters are being seen as a problem rather than a solution for conservation. Both FACE and OMPO called for proof that the conservation efforts in the breeding range states are having a positive impact on the population. Referring to the ongoing hunting moratorium for the nominate sub-species of the Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa limosa*) which has been in place since 2008 and the previous moratorium on the Curlew in France, they noted that the hunting bans have had no positive effect on the population status. Generally, both agreed with establishing an adaptive harvest management process for the Curlew but did not see the value of a process where hunting is seen as a threat. More science is needed to determine the actual causes of decline of the species, hunting should not be the focus.

Dereliev replied that the long-term goal is to recover the population and that any take can slow down this recovery. A part of the process will therefore be to negotiate what range states are willing to accept in terms of the predicted recovery timelines. Brown noted that it would be useful to view examples of instances where adaptive harvest management processes have benefitted the conservation status of declining species and asked the Secretariat to provide such best practice examples.

Decision: Secretariat to provide best practice examples.

6. Overview of occurrence and harvest of Eurasian Curlew in France

In addition to the background information provided by France in document EC IWG AHM 1.2, Leo Bacon/ONCFS presented the outcomes of the French national adaptive harvest management process carried out for the Curlew in 2019. The final opinion of the national adaptive harvest management board concluded, *inter alia*, that due to the lack of data on the demography, spatial distribution and harvest rate of the species

in France it is currently not possible to estimate the sustainability of the harvest. Therefore, the quota recommended was zero.

France added that adaptive management is now compulsory according to French law, and that the government decided to test adaptive harvest management of the Curlew during the current 2019/2020 autumn/winter hunting season. However, the national court has since suspended the harvest, meaning that the test was not fully carried out and only took place over a period of ca. three weeks in August 2019. France added that there is now an obligation for hunters to report numbers of harvested birds via an application for those species which are part of an adaptive harvest management process.

Discussion:

Italy noted that reporting under Article 12 of the EU Birds Directive now requires information on bag data, which presents a great opportunity for hunters to contribute by providing this data.

FACE stated that there is a discrepancy between different datasets, for example between ring re-sighting/recovery data and tracking data. Caution is needed when using some ringing data, particularly from the Netherlands and those of first calendar year birds. Data from Russia must also be considered.

Wetlands International added that an estimated 60,000-70,000 birds migrate through France in autumn and/or winter there. The harvest rate on this segment of the population is therefore actually very high (estimated annual harvest of 7,000 birds, i.e. 10%).

OMPO noted that the main data source for the species was from ring recoveries and concluded that without hunting there would be no conservation efforts for and no data on the species. It is only because it is a huntable species that there is any action happening. The UK noted as a point of principle, that statements implying hunters and/or hunting were being singled out should be avoided, as the objective of the process and the wider AEWA Agreement is to ensure that all stakeholders are able to contribute positively to the process and such comments are therefore neither helpful nor constructive. The AEWA ISSAP was developed and adopted because of the processes under AEWA and the ongoing decline of the species, not solely because of hunting. Germany added that using hunting as a means to gather data has a high cost and considerable risk attached. For some parts of the population, the survival of every individual counts. Germany also agreed that reproductive success is still insufficient in many areas mainly due to agriculture practices and predation, concluding that no one was implying that the population decline is only because of harvest.

7. Establishment of an Adaptive Harvest Management Programme for the Eurasian Curlew

Dereliev/AEWA Secretariat presented the proposed outline of the Adaptive Harvest Management Programme for the Eurasian Curlew sub-species *Numenius a. arquata* as presented in document EC IWG AHM 1.3. In addition, based on the statements made by the Range States, the Secretariat proposed the following four general underlying principles for the development of the Programme:

- The management shall concern only the birds migrating through or wintering in France – not the entire *Numenius a. arquata* population – and all decisions, including quota setting, shall be based on these numbers only;

- Hunting will be suspended as per the legal requirements under AEWA until the international Adaptive Harvest Management Programme is in place and is routinely implemented by the Range States;

- The additional resources required at national level across all Range States related to the monitoring and other pertinent needs specifically for adaptive harvest management shall be provided by the Range State/stakeholders interested in harvesting Eurasian Curlews. These additive resources shall be determined separately from the resources required for the general monitoring and other requirements established in the AEWA EC ISSAP, which are not related to harvest. It is implicit that all resources for the international level of coordination and functioning of the adaptive harvest management process shall be provided by the Range State/stakeholders interested in harvesting Eurasian Curlews;

- Any possible future harvest must not jeopardise ongoing conservation efforts in other Range States. Solutions as to how stakeholders interested in harvest can best offset any negative impacts will be investigated as part of the Programme.

Discussion:

France, Germany, Finland and the Netherlands noted that they could only make initial statements on the proposal pending further national consultations.

- *General concept, programme outline and general principles*

There was general agreement on the principles presented by the Secretariat as well as agreement by the UK, Norway, Sweden and Finland on the general concept outline.

CIC inquired about the significance of knowing which proportion of the population migrates through France. Wetlands International responded that the impact of hunting in France is restricted to a certain segment of the population (long-distance migrants) which can potentially lead to an overharvest of that particular segment. Dereliev added that there is a direct implication for the hunting community, if there is an overharvest of the population segment occurring in France (i.e. slower recovery/continued decline equaling less or no opportunities for harvest). FACE inquired how possible harvest in Africa would be taken into account. Dereliev noted that this will be discussed in the Technical Group, which was followed by a request from the UK to be pragmatic, as the primary focus should be on working with France.

With regard to how stakeholders interested in practicing harvest could potentially support conservation efforts in the breeding areas, Dereliev mentioned the option of French hunting organisations working with the Network of north-European Hunting Organisations ("Waterfowlers' Network") coordinated by the Danish Hunters Association, for example in relation to habitat management and predator control. Several Range States noted that a possible collaboration should extend beyond predator control as results have been inconclusive in some areas. Brown confirmed that across many parts of the breeding range knowledge on what conservation action will actually deliver increased breeding success of the Curlew is still lacking.

Several Range States considered the proposed timeline to be unrealistic, especially when gaps in data and resources are considered. The UK had similar concerns but stressed that much can be achieved in the next year and encouraged Parties to work towards the proposed timeline, noting that they can be reassessed as the process is undertaken and better understood. Dereliev reiterated that timelines would be revised and refined by the Technical Group, based on their assessment of additional data needs. Dereliev added that it could very well be that the current available data is insufficient to run adaptive harvest management but noted that the decision at hand was whether to set up the long-term process to get to the stage of having the data.

OMPO questioned the need for annual decision-making. While the UK noted Parties should keep an open mind to the periodicity of decision-making suggesting that, although annual decision-making may be the most effective frequency it (and that the UK would support this if it were the case), it would be important to make a fully informed decision based on an assessment of the implications of less frequent decision-making. Dereliev supported by Wetlands International noted that the timeline for decision-making should not be defined firmly at this stage and that although annual decision-making may require higher resources, it also carries a lower risk.

OMPO and FACE noted the hunting community to be very aware of the need to avoid jeopardising the survival of the species and that the continued efforts of the French hunters for the Curlew should be taken into account and further encouraged. The longer hunting is closed the less support there will be from the hunting community, therefore the proposed process should be set up as soon as possible.

France and CIC inquired whether the process should already include provisions for other countries potentially re-opening Curlew harvest in future. Dereliev replied that the Programme is meant to regulate hunting where it currently exists and that no other European countries (where Curlew hunting could legally be re-opened) anticipate harvest at this time. Should such a situation arise, it will be dealt with in the iterative phase.

- *Proposed coordination of the Adaptive Harvest Management Programme*

There was general support for the proposed international coordination to be provided by the AEWA Secretariat and Aarhus University. However, the Netherlands questioned the involvement of Aarhus University and noted that at the June 2019 EGM IWG meeting there had been a decision not to expand the European Goose Management Platform (EGMP) process to other taxa at this time. Dereliev clarified that the proposal was not to integrate the Curlew process into the EGMP, but rather to have annual decision-making on the Curlew back-to-back with the EGMP as this will logistically be most efficient. Dereliev also noted that Aarhus University is not proposed to implement the entire Programme, but rather to coordinate and provide oversight based on

their experience of establishing and running the EGMP as well as on the basis of their formal cooperation agreement with the Secretariat.

There was also general support for the convening of a Technical Group. However, Finland and Germany expressed serious concerns regarding the availability of resources to engage in the Group, noting also that insufficient representation from all range states would threaten the process. France inquired whether all range states needed to be involved in the Technical Group or if instead, it would be sufficient if all countries provided their data. The UK supported having a face-to-face meeting of the Group and noted that Terms of Reference should be provided. Brown noted that the interaction between the Technical Group and the overall AEWA EC IWG would need to be clarified. Finland added that the invitation to designate national experts should be explicit in terms of what expertise is being requested.

Dereliev noted the constraints expressed by Finland and Germany and hoped that both countries would be able to mobilise expert resources to participate in the Technical Group, as the goal is to run an inclusive process and that the participation of Finland in particular, as the European range state with the largest breeding population, would be crucial.

- *Additional data requirements and costs*

The Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Finland and the UK all expressed concerns related to the additional costs of the Programme, noting that they would not be able to justify contributing financially to any of the additional costs related to the adaptive harvest management component. The Netherlands could, however, potentially provide in-kind expert support to define the Favourable Reference Values. France noted that two people from ONCFS will be dedicated to the implementation of the Programme on technical level; with regard to providing additional funding for the necessary international coordination costs, no commitment could be made before a more detailed budget is available.

Dereliev noted that France is expected to cover the necessary international coordination costs and that a clearer costing is needed for the additional monitoring and other pertinent needs of the adaptive harvest management element. This costing task will be included in ToR for the Technical Group and these additional costs should be covered by the Range State/stakeholder groups practicing hunting.

Dereliev reiterated that many of the foreseen products linked to monitoring will not only deliver on the adaptive harvest management element but will rather benefit the overall conservation of the species – such as the determination of the Favourable Reference Values. Progress on achieving the overall objectives of the ISSAP will be advanced through this scientific work. Dereliev referred again to the general monitoring obligations of all range states under the AEWA EC ISSAP. Norway supported this, noting that one benefit of establishing the international process would be the opportunity to trigger more national monitoring.

France commented that the hunting bag is the only additional data needed, so there should only be an additional cost for France. Dereliev responded that the iterative process would require more frequent reporting from other range states (for example on reproduction) which would represent added costs. Wetlands International added that the predictive models need data every year. Funding will also be required to establish the true population size in northern Africa. Finland concurred that breeding success fluctuates quite substantially between areas and between years. Brown/Coordinator stressed that measuring productivity for a relatively widely-dispersed species presents challenges and is resource-intensive.

Finland, Sweden, the UK and Germany also highlighted the challenges linked to the provision of data, collected to various extent by citizen scientists (many of whom are motivated by the conservation of the species and are opposed to it being hunted) etc. to inform an adaptive harvest management process to support hunting in France. The Netherlands have an open data policy and will therefore supply any available data to the process.

Regarding the use of data to inform adaptive harvest management, Dereliev noted communication with all relevant stakeholders to be key. By providing data, range states will be ensuring that any harvest of the species is sustainable, thus contributing to the restoration of the population to a favourable conservation status. Hence a communication element had been added to the proposed budget. Wetlands International agreed fully with respect to the raised communication challenges and suggested that the level of ambition should be raised to the level of speaking of a net positive impact.

Decisions:

- The Range States present agreed to launch development of the Programme (taking into account the reservations and caveats made by certain Range States as outlined above);
- The four principles outlined to guide the development were agreed by the Range States present;
- The outline of the Programme was agreed by the UK, Finland, Sweden and Norway (further consultations will be carried out with other key range states);
- The proposed structure of the international coordination (AEWA Secretariat and Aarhus University) and workflow was agreed;
- The next steps and tentative timelines were agreed, to be revised by the Technical Group in early 2020;
- The items against which the AEWA Secretariat and the Technical Group will provide more detailed budgeting were agreed.

8. Next steps

Dereliev/AEWA Secretariat summarised the proposed next steps in the process as follows: the Secretariat will circulate the written statement received from the European Commission for information as well as the draft minutes for comments and will also consult the Principal Range States not present at the meeting (Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Estonia), with the aim to wrap up the agreement on the establishment of the process within October 2019. The Secretariat will then proceed with convening the Technical Group. A modified timeline will be presented in early 2020, following deliberations within the Technical Group on data, human capacity and funding needs.

9. Closure of the meeting

Dereliev/AEWA Secretariat thanked all participants for their constructive participation and also thanked the French Ministry for the Ecological and Inclusive Transition, ONCFS, the French National History Museum and OMPO for hosting the meeting and providing all the logistical arrangements including the fantastic venue.