ISSUE 95
SUMMER 2019

Wild Land News

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group

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The wildness of the Flow Country

The invasion of Sitka

Scotland's Landscape Alliance

Wild Land: what is it?

Summer 2019

WILD LAND NEWS
Issue 95

Magazine of the
Scottish Wild Land Group

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Printed by
Bay Printing
Dalgety Bay

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Help us safeguard wild land:

If you come across any proposed developments which might damage wild land, please let us know

Front cover: Morvern and the Flow Country
Left: Aonach Mor
Photos: James Fenton

Date for your diaries!

SWLG 2019 AGM

The last two AGMs were held in the pleasant and centrally located Birnam Centre, near Dunkeld. We appreciate that very many of our members live in Edinburgh and in a bid to encourage them along to the AGM we have decided to hold this year's meeting in the city.

Quakers' Meeting House, Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh
Saturday 7th December at 2pm

The AGM will be at 2pm in the Meeting Room, followed by light refreshments and socialising in the Library.

A further event is planned at around 3pm, such as a debate or presentation on a current topic .

The venue is on Victoria Terrace in the Old Town, close to the High Street, Edinburgh EH1 2JL. There is a vast choice of lunch venues close to hand. We very much hope you can join us.

Sitka spruce jumping the fence.

James Fenton

Editorial

Although commercial forestry is undoubtedly a benefit to the local economy, its presence certainly removes any element of wildness. Careful planning is needed to ensure any new plantations do not permanently damage Scotland's cherished landscapes. The Flow Country, ably described in this issue by Andrew Painting, provides an example where plantations have had to be removed (which is not cheap) to restore the internationally recognised wild, peatland landscape.

David Jarman raises another overlooked impact of forestry: the potential for self-seeded Sitka spruce (and other commercial conifers) to change the whole face of Scottish upland landscapes – turning them into forested areas similar to those found in the Pacific Northwest of America.

The spruce grows well in our climate and on our soils, which is why it is the now the commonest tree used in forestry plantations. In fact it can spread much more successfully than our own native trees, being better able to cope with the ecological conditions found here. This is a matter of evolutionary chance. If the Sitka spruce had naturally colonised Scotland we would have a very different ecology.

So why does it matter? At a global level biodiversity (nature) conservation is about conserving the range of species and habitats found across the world. The Scottish hills are different ecologically from the Pacific Northwest (which may be due to the natural vagaries of evolution), so if we make them the same, allowing their distinctly Scottish characteristics to be lost, we will be contributing to the global loss of biodiversity, to the continuing global homogenisation of landscapes, to the loss of wildness – and my article in this issue explains what I mean here by 'wildness'.

Apply the 'polluter pays' principle to Sitka spruce

Sitka, unlike rhododendron, is easy to control: you just cut it down. As for its spread, surely we should apply the 'polluter pays' principle? Owners who allow spruce trees to spread out from their plantations should keep them under control!

Hopefully these are some of the issues to be tackled by the new Scotland's Landscape Alliance, discussed by Beryl Leatherland on the next page.

Beryl Leatherland

Scotland's Landscape Alliance

In the Editorial of *Wild Land News* Winter 2017/18 (Issue 92) I reflected on what the efforts of SWLG and others had achieved over the last couple of decades in protecting the Scottish landscapes through influencing national policy and legislation. If you wish to refer back to this, it is available on the SWLG website. My conclusion amounted to not a lot – despite publications, articles, meetings, events, lobbying, conferences and a great deal of work by many knowledgeable and concerned people. This is surprising considering that tourism in Scotland, perhaps our most lucrative industry, is heavily reliant on Scotland's exceptional scenery.

We need to raise the level of political interest in our land-scapes

Nevertheless, we must continue to be optimistic that progress can be made, especially if we are alert to opportunities to achieve our aspirations. In the Editorial referred to above I suggested we should work in partnership with a wider range of organisations: to both increase public awareness and support and to raise expectations. Collectively, via imaginative and innovative advocacy strategies, we need to raise the level of political interest in the value of our varied landscapes which contribute so much to our lives and economy .

To this end, Scotland's Landscape Alliance (SLA) has been set up. This largely evolved from discussions held by members of the Scottish Environment LINK Landscape Group; and a mid-2018 cross party parliamentary event organised by the Landscape Institute of Scotland (LIS) acted as a further catalyst. Since then, the National Trust for Scotland and the LIS took on the responsibility for funding and driving this initiative forwards: an Executive Committee was set up from the very many organisations initially contacted, with SWLG as a member.

An important starting point was to commission some background research and conduct a survey; the findings from these contributed to the direction and content of the launch of the Alliance in April this year at Our Dynamic Earth.

The launch was attended by around 100 people from over 60 organisations, representing diverse sectors and interests, from the

NHS, local authorities and academia to the Central Scotland Green Network Trust, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Scotland's Urban Regeneration Forum, the Scottish Land Commission, the Royal Town Planning Institute, Scottish Land and Estates and the Scottish Geodiversity Forum.

Three Working Groups have been set up:

- Landscape and Environmental Challenges Group
- Landscapes and Healthy Communities
- Landscape, Land Use and the Economy

These will meet over a period of several months to address the tasks of drawing up recommendations to promote the benefits that our landscapes provide, both urban and rural, and to enhance their care.

SWLG is an active member of the Landscape and Environmental Challenges Group and a corresponding member of the other two groups. We don't have enough capacity, as an entirely voluntary organisation, to actively participate in all three groups.

Is this the right time for such an alliance? After all, several such alliances have been set up over the last few years such as the Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance, the Scottish Rewilding Alliance and so on. This would seem to be a good a time: there are opportunities to be exploited, one of these being the development of an Environmental Strategy, where in the associated discussion paper the value and importance of Scottish landscapes are referenced.

Other initiatives being promoted that are relevant to landscapes include the push by several environmental NGOs for a National Ecological Network and landscape-scale conservation strategies. We have missed early opportunities for lobbying for landscape

Glen Creran: A modern Highland landscape of farmland on the glen floor, forestry plantations on the hill slopes and wild land above – the latter impacted by a new hydro track . Photo Peter Dunn

Glencoe, an iconic Highland landscape
Photo James Fenton

considerations to feature in the Planning Bill currently plodding its way through our parliamentary processes.

However, once the Bill has been debated at Stage 3 in mid-June, the resulting Act will be followed by new versions of Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) and the National Performance Framework 4 (NPF4). There is some reference to Wild Land Areas in the current documents but we must at least ensure this is still the case in the new documents, and reject any dilution – and we may look to our new allies to support us in this.

We plan to post future progress updates on the work of the SLA on the SWLG website, so do keep an eye on that.

It is of course early days, and it will be important to avoid becoming a mere ‘talking shop’ but we are optimistic that the partnerships and interests involved, whether professional or voluntary, can work together: to build relationships and networks which achieve positive outcomes in the public interest and to enhance the value and role attributed to landscapes.

It will be important to avoid the Alliance becoming a mere ‘talking shop’

David Jarman

Boiling the alien conifer frog: The invasion of Sitka

There is an unusually narrow, deep-cut, and wild-feeling valley in the North-Western Fells of Pondland called Gasgale Gill, that hangs steeply into the Vale of Lorton near Crummock Water; a few people find their way up into it and traverse over Coledale Head down to Keswick. Returning there to research its peculiarities[1] it came as a shock to realise that the bare, heathery slopes were becoming infested with a scattering of Sitka spruce, a native of North America. The nearest seed source would be over the high crest of Grizedale Pike in the Whinlatter Forest. The recency of this invasion might be ascribed to the forest attaining seed-productive peak maturity; a rare north or north-easterly gale (there are no seed sources around Lorton); or some reduction in sheep grazing.

It took me a day to purge most of this invasion, with secateurs and a pruning saw, base-cutting those old enough not to regrow (*ca*. 10 years old, I am advised) and uprooting the smaller ones. And another day likewise the even more recondite back valley of Hope Gill to the north. I then made a Powerpoint slide show[2] of the before and after, dolled up to suggest what these 'pristine' and quintessential side valleys would otherwise look like after a mere few decades of Sitka invasion, and sent it to Friends of the Lake District with the suggestions that they might: (a) organise volunteers to repeat my ecowarrior good deeds at intervals; and (b) take up the issue with the Forestry Commission, National Park, and other 'stakeholders' (a term I tend to associate with stakes and piles of faggots).

The relevant staff saw the point and promised to pursue it, but despite reminders and offers of help, were always overtaken by more urgent priorities (the floods...) and personnel changes.

A cut-down self-seeded spruce in the Lake District. Photo: David Jarman

And so doubtless even in the most universally-esteemed and precious landscape in Britain – where public sentiment has prevented the National Trust re-wooding its own properties – an alien forest will steadily evolve. The 'boiling frog' may be scientific bunk, but the metaphor accurately captures our collective inability to recognise creeping detrimental change, let alone act when it is no-one's direct responsibility, when there are no policies addressing it, when there are no short-term financial or political benefits in devoting resources to it – time, attention, money.

Gasgale Gill is a cameo for what can be seen writ large across upland Britain and especially the Highlands. Back in the 1990s when I began researching mountain landforms, and delved into the recesses of Ben Ledi, it was distressing to find young conifers up in the little corrie well above the forest line, colonising the giant rockfall where grazing was impeded. Under the aegis of this Group, I organised a small work party with Forest Enterprise support to hand weed conifers spreading up the shoulder conspicuous across Loch Lubnaig. The District Manager was very sympathetic, and I had hoped this demonstration example could persuade them to adopt it widely as good sanitary practice. Inevitably, that hope remains vain.

The pattern of invasion

If we take as a given that large-scale commercial forestry based on non-native conifers is here to stay, then there are three main patterns in its spread beyond planned limits to be addressed:

- Along roadsides – this is now leading with tangible rapidity to 'tunnel vision' for mile after mile in the Highlands. Road verges are ideal vectors for seed dispersal from both adjacent forests and haulage traffic. Industrial machin-

Sitka spruce colonising heather moorland in the North Pennines, distant from the original plantation (background). Photo: James Fenton

Sitka spruce colonising the open hill on the route up The Cobbler. Photo David Jarman

ery can tackle this easily; making it happen much less so, with split ownership and management responsibilities (or lack of).

- Upwards above forest limits – ironically (as observed in Cowal recently, across Loch Eck) a dappling of little conifers can prettily soften a harsh limit. Not so pretty once the forest is a clearfell, or the dappling becomes in its turn dense and skyline dominating. The quasi-natural extension could be retro-designed into the forest management plan, selectively cropped, and edge-controlled.

- Remote seeding into 'wild' hinterlands – at the moment, there is only a thin scattering of isolated alien conifers colonising nooks beyond reach of deer, sometimes several miles from forest limits. But although stunted forms can be found up to high levels, in the middle ground these individuals will mature and become seed sources, nuclei for the next wave of spread.

A new Highland landscape

This last should be of the greatest concern for 'wild land' interests. Ecological models of invasion and succession are long recognised, and would doubtless indicate that within say a century much of the Highlands could be transformed into a new, but exotic, Caledonian Forest, with a neo-natural treeline often approaching the summits. Our prized open montane landscapes (as now venerated under the blessed Nan Shepherd and her evangelists) will become much like those of Canada, Norway, Carpathians, French Pyrenees, and the lesser Alps – where even sharp crests below *ca.*2000m may have no views.

An inability to act when it is no-one's responsibility

On the stitch in time principle, modest investment now in nipping this trend in the bud before the frog boils is just too simple a proposition for politicians or land managers to grasp. Once these pioneer escapes have got away and require chainsaws let alone professional felling, the cost soars.

But here arises a vexing problem. There is a growing sentiment taking

A hiilside above Loch Eck being colonised by Sitka spruce. Photo James Fenton

a revisionist view that all our 'native' trees are invaders, colonisers of a postglacial desert, and that under the 'man as animal' rules of the Anthropocene era, there are no aliens, just migrants. I have recently heard a spirited defence of the Norway spruce as good red squirrel habitat, and of any trees in the 'green desert' wilds being an ecological good thing, this by a Mountain Bothies Association key worker no less. There is even a politically-correct hint of anti-immigration and 'ethnic cleansing' mindsets being censured[3]. More sophisticated arguments are needed if defenders of open uplands and stark corries (stippled by delicate birches and rowans where fitting) are to preserve their landscape inheritance.

And here is another problem. A prime reason for this alien conifer spread is reduction in grazing – removal of sheep, deer culling, or wholesale exclosure zones – often with encouragement of native woodland regeneration in mind. This can be seen to dramatic effect in Glen Feshie, where the Caledonian pine forest is resurgent. But the Law of Unintended Consequences means that alien conifers prosper even more readily from these well-intentioned measures[4]. The moral is that sustainable levels of grazing should be restored as soon as native regeneration is secure (or commercial plantations can be reopened), with sanitation clearance of aliens at that point.

The sophisticated argumentation might thus embrace:

- Ecological factors, where alien conifer cover suppresses valued species or habitats
- Access and recreation, where the freedom to roam the heights and

Sitka spruce colonising blanket peat in Inverness-shire. Photo: James Fenton

corries becomes impeded[5]

- Climate change, where the carbon capture benefits of conifer forests planned or unplanned may be negated by the decreased albedo (reflectivity) and thus greater solar gain heat retention of dark trees compared with grass or deciduous woods.

Action needed

For government to grasp this issue means persuading politicians that there are more votes to be won than lost in sanitation in any of these three 'spread' contexts – especially in rural areas which are habituated to conifers and see them as crucial to the economy. Tackling the 'View from the Road' played well with tourism operators and communities when I studied it for SNH some years ago, when the impact was a fraction of that now reached – but nothing concrete came of it. A slogan such as 'Scottish trees for Scottish roadsides – riversides – lochsides' might tinkle a bell. But wider spread beyond planned limits may have to be written off as a lost cause in lower-value landscapes (naming no names, but the portents are there in much of the Southern Uplands).

As for more remote areas, the crowd-sourcing model might be the only hope. If every hillgoer and gangrel carried a lightweight folding saw and took just one invader out each trip… I have made a start on that lovely sylvan strip along the Kinloch Hourn road beside Loch Garry, rogueing spruce from the birks (and found someone had the same idea a decade or two ago), and have uprooted more than a few in the wilds (with stout mitts). Feel free to join in.

The dreaded rhodo

There is a similar story here, if writ small as yet. *Rhododendron ponticum* spread around country houses and shooting lodges is endemic, and rife along roads and railways in the west. But now it is spreading uphill too – witness a great tract above Loch Lochy at

Spruce can also colonise native woods. Photo: James Fenton

Invergloy, smothering the slopes; and just discovered on the doomed Save Glen Etive campaign, way up the braes above Allt Mheuran, and getting toeholds on Beinn Trilleachan. There is more local employment weeding invasives than maintaining hydro weirs…

Notes

(1) Jarman D, Wilson P (2015): Anomalous terrain at Dove Crags cirque–Gasgale Gill, English Lake District, interpreted as a large pre-LGM rock slope failure complex. *Proc. Yorkshire Geol Soc* 60, 243-257.

(2) Contact david.jarman914@virgin.net, if you would like a copy.

(3) Indeed Scots pine is arguably an alien conifer if planted in locations where it died out naturally thousands of years ago.

(4) Another sad consequence being that traversing such terrain on foot has become wading through treacle: comparing Beinn Mhor and Beinn Bheula in Cowal recently, with and without sheep, we found our pace uphill and even on more level going slowed by at least half. This is due to a build up of plant litter and the development of a thick cushion of moss; and some water- courses become invisible where grazing ceases.

(5) Consider the valuable access routes to hills even within the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park completely blocked by forestry – notably The Cobbler and The Brack from Ardgartan.

Postscript

A recent train journey to Thurso reveals swathes of the Caithness Flow Country to be at the first stages of just such a wholesale and probably unstoppable transition to Caledonian Sitka Forest. Wherever the line weaves through remaining open moors within a mile or two of the vast plantations, invasion is rife. The valiant efforts of RSPB to fell-to-waste the most egregious plantations on the actual blanket bogs, and to preserve remaining pristine ‘flows’, will stand out as islands in an unplanned blanket forest.

Rhododendron ponticum beginning to blanket the landscape on Islay. A fore-runner to Sitka spruce? Photo: James Fenton

Andrew Painting

From Wasteland to Wild Land: The Flow Country

When we think of wild land, most of us will think of the mountains, the Caledonian woodlands, the islands. Yet it is the vast bogs of the Flow Country which are perhaps Scotland's true wilderness, and which, on a global scale, are our most important area of wild land.

A walkway on the peat
Photo James Fenton

I first discovered the Flows in 2014, when I spent a cold wet midgey summer helping with the ecological monitoring programme at RSPB's Forsinard nature reserve. After five years of working in London, it was a tonic. It was the place where I learned that the land is not placed here for our enjoyment, but must be understood on its own terms. I studied black-throated divers, common scoters, greenshanks, golden plovers, some of our rarest birds. I learned that the peat accumulates over thousands of years, as sphagnum moss slowly decomposes. I probed the peat, finding areas ten metres deep, which had been slowly growing since the last Ice Age. I was told that the peat in this vast area contained the same amount of carbon as a century's worth of Scotland's emissions.

Golden plover. Photo Andrew Painting

There is really only one landscape in Scotland that truly deserves to be called 'vast'. It is the Flow Country, the watery wild bogs of Sutherland and Caithness. Covering around 1,600 square miles, they are the largest area of blanket bog in Europe – one of the world's rarest habitats. Here, there are few large hills. Instead, long straths give way to uplands which are literally

Ben Loyal in the distance. Photo Andrew Painting

blanketed with slow-forming peat, and the complex webs of pools and lochans that the peat supports. On a global scale, this is our most important area of wild land.

The Flow Country is wild land without pretension. It turns its back on egotistic adventurers. It defies walkers and path builders with an impenetrable maze of pools and bogs. It is a place where the ground is neither solid nor liquid. It bounces and moves under your feet, sending ripples tens of metres across the bog. It can quickly turn into a midgey, cleggy hellscape. When the rain comes, which it does extremely regularly, there is no shelter for miles. But it is also a place of intense beauty, with huge skies, subtle colours, rare wildlife and, in winter, the merry dancers, the northern lights.

The Flow Country – once labelled as a wasteland

To understand the Flows, humans must come to the land with humility and respect. Yet for all its wildness, there is a long history of human settlement around the Flows; and of use of its resources, though settlements have been mostly confined to the long, fertile straths. For millennia, the Flows' ability to spurn humanity afforded it a certain amount of protection from 'improving' development. But it has also led to its miscomprehension and, ultimately, to its exploitation. Indeed, the far north of Scotland has seen more than its fair share of mismanagement and abuse, to the detriment of both the Flows and the people who have called it home.

Once labelled as a wasteland in need of improvement, now the tables have turned. Conservationists and scientists have long realised that restoring the bogs and largely leaving them to their own devices can provide more benefits for both people and the environment than any 'improving' management could ever hope to achieve. Now it seems, the world is beginning to catch up.

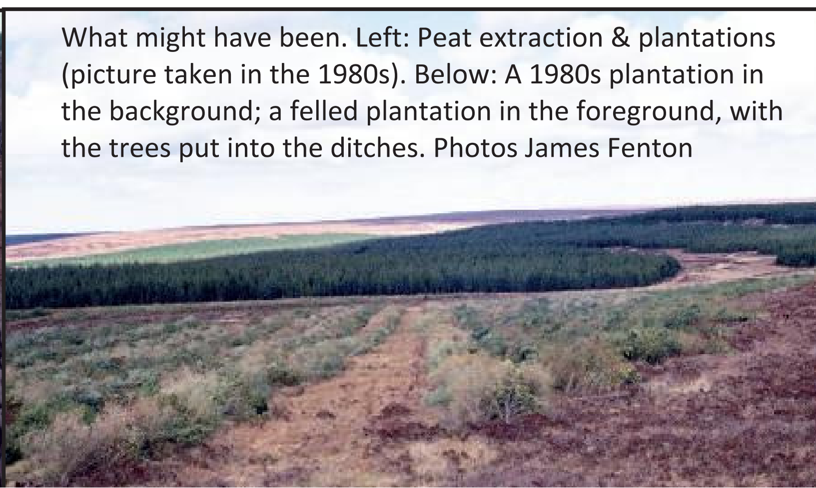
A contested landscape

Throughout history, many a visitor has considered the Flows to be either an untapped resource or a barren wasteland – a place so lacking in 'improvement' as to be considered by some to be immoral. Yet crofting communities have used the bogs for grazing and for fuel for centuries, a practice largely without detriment to the overall health of the land. It wasn't until the twentieth century that people with an eye on 'improving' the Flows actually had the technology to do anything about it. The first wave of 'improvement' focussed on peat harvesting and drainage, and ultimately this gave way to non-native forestry operations. Government tax incentives in the 1970s and 1980s led to a big increase in forest planting, and large areas of bog that had been treeless for thousands of years were drained, ploughed, and planted with fast-growing conifers. Service tracks were cut deep into the peat.

These plantations were devastating to a fragile ecosystem. Little could live under the thick canopy, and even the trees themselves struggled to survive. The forestry blocks turned the bogs into a patchwork of poorly considered plantings, most of which survive to this day.

It was only in the 1990s that conservationists began to stem the loss of wild bog to the drain and the planters. The tax breaks that were driving the forest expansion were stopped. In 1995, RSPB took on the Forsinard reserve. In 1996, they began work to restore the forestry to blanket bog, and experiment with the best ways of doing so.

It's slow work, which can take as much as a century. Trees need to be felled, ploughed furrows filled and drains blocked. The process involves increasing the height of the water table and stimulating the growth of the sphagnum mosses which bog ecosystems rely on. Now, the benefits are beginning to show. Sphagnum mosses are recolonising lost areas, and the water table is rising, and the scars are beginning to heal.



What might have been. Left: Peat extraction & plantations (picture taken in the 1980s). Below: A 1980s plantation in the background; a felled plantation in the foreground, with the trees put into the ditches. Photos James Fenton

Blanket peat and bog pools (dubh lochs). Photo James Fenton

While conservationists have been aware of the dangers of climate change for some time, the initial push to save the Flows was largely for reasons of biodiversity. Now, the true value of the bogs as a tool in the fight against climate change is becoming more fully appreciated, but bogs in poor condition actually leach carbon into the atmosphere.

The planted trees, which will never make a viable commercial crop, caused the bogs to emit carbon rather than store it. Shockingly, some 80% of Britain's peatlands are in a poor condition, turning them from a carbon sink to a carbon source. The fight is now on to restore peatlands across Scotland, and the lessons learned about bog restoration in the Flows are being put to use across the country.

Flowing into the Future?

The road from Helmsdale to Melvich, the A897, is a forty mile single track road. It is not on the NC500 (North Coast 500), nor does it take the driver to any Munros. It is among the quietest major roads in Britain. About halfway along the road lies the hamlet of Forsinard. Here, there is little more than a railway station, a few houses and a hotel which is currently closed. And yet just to the south of the tiny settlement lies a remarkable new building, the Dubh Lochan Viewing Tower.

The building curves and spirals out of the bogs and pools, looking out towards the Ben Griams. Built in 2015, it's a sensitive but forward thinking building – despite its size it sits lightly in the landscape, appearing to float on top of the peat. It actually won an architectural prize. It's not particularly tall, but it is taller than the flat surrounding bogs, and so provides visitors a truly remarkable view across the Flows. Alongside the newly revamped visitor centre

in the railway station, it is worth a trip to see for its own sake.

The tower is part of a project that seeks to address the thorny problem of how to enthuse people about a landscape and foster long term economic and social investment in a landscape which does its absolute utmost to deter people from exploring it. That, at least, is the plan for the Peatlands Partnership – a group started in 2006, which comprises NGOs, public bodies and local landowners. The Flows to the Future project is the latest major project from the Peatlands Partnership. Started in 2014, it was awarded £4 million from Heritage Lottery Fund.

It is an ambitious project. Alongside the viewing tower it is delivering a new scientific research centre, increased visitor services around the Flows, and the restoration of some 1,000 hectares of plantation to bog. Somewhere along the way, the Flows have become a major scientific hub in the increasingly popular subject of peatland ecology, bringing

Not a rugged landscape, but still a wild one; a dubh lochan in the foreground. Photo James Fenton

researchers from across the world to the area.

Finding the balance between thriving wild land and a thriving local community can be tricky, but with human populations declining across Sutherland and Caithness, it's an issue that is becoming increasingly important. Flows to the Future also seeks to generate both long term employment opportunities and tourist attractions across the Flows. The next development is a World Heritage Site bid, which is currently being consulted on.

There is still work to be done. Summiting Ben Hope, you will see plantations of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine crowding the scene to the south. But from the carefully curated visitor experience at Forsinard, it is possible to glimpse

The new RSPB Dubh Lochan Viewing Tower. Photo Andrew Painting

one potential future for the Flows, as a scientific hub, low-intensity visitor attraction and giant ‘carbon farm’, soaking up our emissions.

The Peatland Partnership’s utopian vision for the future of the Flows remains somewhat fragile. Drainage and forestry are now no longer a danger for the bogs, but there is a new range of threats to this landscape, which includes the construction of poorly-sited windfarms and even a proposal for a spaceport. In May 2019, a huge wildfire spread from Melvich down Strath Halladale. The fire was the largest in Scotland since 2003, burning some 25 square kilometres of land, including 800 hectares of recently restored blanket bog on the Forsinard RSPB nature reserve. Such fires highlight the importance of rewetting dried bogs, but nevertheless, they are likely to increase as climate change alters long-term weather patterns.

Ben Griam in the distance.
Photo Andrew Painting

Meanwhile, over at Ben Hope, Anders Povlsen’s Wildland company has bought up the majority of land surrounding Tongue, promising local investment and a sustainable future for the bogs, bens and woodlands of the area. A few chats with a couple of locals in January suggested that the jury was still out on whether this was considered to be a good or bad development, but if it is nothing else it is just the latest permutation of the difficult question of large landowners in a post-Clearance landscape.

The future seems brighter for the Flows

Certainly, the future seems brighter for the Flows. If visitors can walk out into the plover-haunted bogs, then they will see a landscape healing itself; and also people working to define new ways of working with wild land for the benefit of people and the environment. But, as with all things wild land, progress is glacial, and fragile.

James Fenton

Musings on the meaning of wild land

What is meant by wild?

A wild experience. The wild Highlands. Really wild! Wildlife. Wild nature. Wild land. Wildness. Wilderness. Re-wild… We use the word 'wild' all the time but what does it mean?

The best place to start is probably a dictionary and the definition given in the *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* is amongst the most comprehensive. The word is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *wilde*:

> **WILD** adjective (***wilder***, ***wildest***) **1** said of animals: untamed or undomesticated; not dependent on humans. **2** said of plants: growing in a natural uncultivated state. **3** said of country: desolate, rugged, inhospitable or uninhabitable. **4** said of peoples: savage; uncivilized. **5** unrestrained; uncontrolled • *wild fury*. **6** frantically excited. **7** distraught • *wild with grief*. **8** dishevelled; disordered • *wild attire*. **9** said of the eyes: staring; distracted or scared-looking. **10** said of weather: stormy. **11** said of plans or hopes, etc: crazy; impracticable or unrealistic. **12** said of a guess: very approximate, or quite random. **13** *colloq* furious; extremely angry. **14** *slang* enjoyable; terrific.

What is the common thread to all these meanings of 'wild'? Perhaps the word 'uncontrolled' is the key where, by implication, 'control' means 'human control': someone 'wild with fury' is not in control of themselves; in the same way that a wild animal is not under the control of humans: they are undomesticated, they are untamed. The word 'wild' can also apply to an untamed location:

> **WILD** noun **1** (**the wild**) a wild animal's or plant's natural environment or life in it • *returned the cub to the wild*. **2** (**wilds**) lonely, sparsely inhabited regions away from the city. **wildish** adj. **wildly** adverb. **wildness** noun. **run wild 1** said of a garden or plants: to revert to a wild, overgrown and uncultivated state. **2** said eg of children: to live a life of freedom, with little discipline or control. **wild about someone** or **something** intensely fond of or keen on them or it. **wild and woolly** unrefined or unpolished; crude.

If we accept that something wild is something 'not under the control of humans', then what is it under the control of? The only answer is that it is under the control of natural forces, of nature itself. Which leads us to the question of 'What is nature?' The answer is in fact given in one of the definitions above: 'not dependent on humans.'

Natural *v.* artificial

To make sense of the complex world, we as humans need to classify things and one binary classification which has proved useful to us over the centuries is the distinction between the natural world (natural features) and the artificial world (artefacts, or human-created features). Hence by definition something 'natural' is something inherited from nature, not from us. For example we did not invent or create trees or mountains, but we did invent cars and the national grid. We did not invent electricity, only the means to harness it to our own ends.

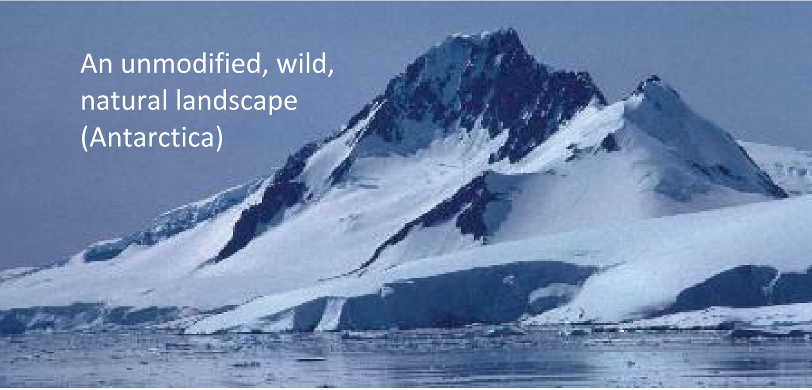
This separation of natural and artificial leads to the two different kinds of conservation: the conservation of the natural heritage (aspects created by nature) and the conservation of cultural heritage (artefacts created by humans). For example, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is about conserving natural aspects whereas Historic Environment Scotland is about cultural aspects.

A fundamental difference between the two types is that we humans did not choose which species and habitats naturally occur in a given locality: nature is not democratic in this way – what we have inherited from nature is what we have inherited from nature! We cannot democratically decide what kind of wild land we should have in a given area (although we can decide how much). On the other hand, the cultural heritage has been created by us humans and it is for us to decide what kind of heritage to conserve where – particularly as the historic environment is generally a palimpsest.

It is fashionable to say that nothing is natural because everything has

A view of wild (natural) features

A view of artificial features (artefacts)


An unmodified, wild, natural landscape (Antarctica)

been affected by humans, and, in any case, we are part of nature so everything we do is natural! But, for a start, apart from a few kilometres thick area of earth, we have nothing to do with the state of the sun, the structure of the moon, or indeed the rest of the universe!

Most things in the universe certainly are natural, emphasising that the word has meaning. And secondly, although it is true that we evolved from nature, if you argue therefore that everything we do is natural, this undermines the rationale for any particular nature conservation action: for example, making species extinct, burning fossil fuels or polluting a ditch would be activities just as natural as a burn flowing downhill, a bumble-bee building a nest or the development of patterned ground in the Arctic. This is patently absurd (but logically correct if you define natural and artificial as the same)! Remember, it is us humans who have made the distinction because it helps us make sense of the world.

But what has all this got to do with wild land, I hear you ask? Hopefully it helps clarify that wild land is both a valid concept (no-one would argue that surface of Pluto is not wild land, although they might argue about how wild is a particular location on earth); and that wild land is where nature, not humans, is in charge.

The fact that humans may have consciously chosen to let an area retain its natural characteristics does not make it any less wild. Why we might want to make the value judgement that wild land, or indeed species and habitats, should be conserved for their own sakes is a philosophical question not discussed here (but often discussed in *Wild Land News* by those discussing, for example, for the spiritual aspect of wild places).

Official definitions

SNH on their website define wild land as:

> "Large areas of Scotland – chiefly in the north and west – which have largely semi-natural landscapes that show minimal signs of human influence. These may be mountains and moorland, undeveloped coastline or peat bog."

If for the moment we equate wild land with wilderness (this is

A modified, cultural landscape

Even tropical rainforest has been modified by indigenous peoples

discussed further below) the international (IUCN) definition of a 'Wilderness Area' is:

> "Large unmodified or slightly modified areas that retain their natural character without permanent or significant human habitation, which are protected and managed so as to preserve their natural condition."

Note that both these definitions allow some signs of human influence, which is not surprising because all the planet except the highest mountains, the Greenland ice-cap, the Antarctic and a few very remote islands have been inhabited by us for thousands of years. And humans have been known to have been making species extinct (particularly large mammals) for thousands of years, which is bound to have had a knock-on effect on the vegetation pattern in many areas, as has the use of fire.

In spite of this, it could be argued that humans in the hunter-gatherer phase of evolution were just another predator and 'more natural' than modern humans whose technology has an ability to modify the world way beyond our hunter-gatherer forebears. Hence there was a marked increase in the loss of naturalness (loss of wild land) once our characteristics began to diverge significantly from other species, once farming started, and humans began to *consciously* modify the planet to their own ends.

Thus a better definition of wild land than the ones given above is perhaps:

> "Areas where the species composition is not chosen by humans, but at the whim of nature".

This can allow for some human impact in the past, but the future is up to nature.

The problem of introduced species

There is, however, a complicating factor in all this in that we have introduced species into ecosystems which, long-term, might modify the ecology even more than humans. There are both natural and artificial elements to this: the original introduction (by definition) is artificial, but the subsequent spread is natural.

So should we accept such species in wild land, where we want things to develop naturally? Being pragmatic, we cannot control them all. Some species will have such a high impact that there is likely to be landscape modification on such a large scale that most original wildness will be lost (for example *Rhododendron ponticum* or colonising Sitka spruce discussed in David Jarman's article above). In these instances, the effects of the original artificial introduction need to be reversed. On the other hand some widespread species, for example New Zealand willowherb, probably have minimal impact on the wider ecosystem.

Should we accept non-native species as part of wild land?

It is perhaps true that the continuing artificial movement of species around the world is a huge threat to the whole concept: it may lead eventually to the concept of wild land being 'the species composition we have inherited from nature' having to be abandoned, and changed to 'any area we do not manage, whether the species composition has been decided by nature or by humans.' Long-term this will result in a major global loss of biodiversity because a few cosmopolitan invaders will now dominate everywhere. But is there anything we can do about it?

Skunk cabbage and Sitka spruce on Mull. A modern Highland landscape, totally different from that comprised of indigenous vegetation. Is it wild land?

Large-scale wildness (Torridon)

In fact this concept of wild land being areas we do not manage (without any concern about naturalness) has always been part of the definition. For example, the dictionary definition above states that a garden that has 'run wild' is one reverting 'to a wild, overgrown and uncultivated state.'

The question of scale

This kind of garden may be quite small, which raises again the question of scale: why do both the SNH and IUCN definitions say that wild land areas have to be large? I once had a pond in my garden with a myriad of water creatures, from pond skaters on the surface to water boatmen, caddis larvae, *etc.* underneath. I was not in charge of which species turned up or what they did: surely therefore, this is wild land? Similarly the damp sludge at the bottom of my rones (gutters) contains a whole ecosystem of dead leaves, tardigrades, rotifers, protozoa and fungi. I haven't a clue what goes on! Wild land, surely?

So why is scale important? I think there are two reasons why wild areas are normally seen as large.

Firstly, large mammals are (or were) a natural component of most ecosystems, and if we want the full suite of indigenous carnivores and herbivores then we need large areas in order to fulfil their ecological needs. And certainly all the research shows that the greater extent of the area, the greater the chance of conserving all the component species. However if some or all of these species are no longer present, is there such an imperative to ensure all the areas have to be large? Surely, for example, there is a lot of naturalness left at the moorland top of a lowland hill which has escaped agricultural improvement, tree planting and wind farms? And whose plant communities are mostly natural?

Two kinds of wildness

And the mention of wind farms introduces another aspect of wildness which has resulted in the perception that wild areas need to be large: wind farms are highly visible artefacts, their presence introducing a human element. The dictionary definition above refers to 'lonely, sparsely inhabited areas', and the presence of any artefact introduces a human element into a

Small-scale wildness (pond surface with pond skaters)

wild area. Hence to 'get away from it all', to go to an area where nature really does appear to be in charge, generally necessitates wild land areas to be large.

To date, in Scotland the wild land debate has largely been about about retaining remote areas: areas without structures such as tracks, masts, turbines and dams. It certainly has not been about keeping the ecosystem in my gutters!

This leads to an identification of two different (but related) types of wildness:

– **Ecological wildness**: where the species composition is determined by nature
– **Remoteness**: where only natural features are visible

As far as ecological wildness is concerned, nature is not always particularly concerned if artefacts are present: the presence of a single phone mast in the hills, for example, will not affect the ecological wildness: nature will still direct the ecology. But such a mast will significantly reduce the feeling of remoteness. There is sometimes a link between the artefacts we place in the hills and ecological wildness: for example, bulldozing tracks into the hills results in potential corridors for the invasion of non-indigenous plants, and

Even a single phone mast reduces the sense of wildness

building dams affects the natural flows of rivers.

Hence wildness *sensu* remoteness necessarily needs large geographical areas to ensure no artefacts are visible. Ecological wildness, on the other hand, does not necessarily need large areas: it depends on the characteristics of the ecosystem in question. A small island off the coast of Scotland, for example, which never had large indigenous mammals, could be as wild as a large wilderness with the full suite of carnivores and herbivores or, going the other way, as wild as the goings-on in my gutters!

Although I have just used the term 'wilderness', in Scotland it normally replaced by the term 'wild land' and SNH in its wildness policy statement of 2002 explains why:

> "While the term 'wilderness' is often used to describe the wilder parts of the globe, it is best avoided in Scotland because it

> implies a more pristine setting than we can ever experience in our countryside, where most wild land shows some effects from past human use."

I actually disagree with this: as stated above, most terrestrial ecosystems have had indigenous populations and show signs of human use, whether tropical rainforest in Brazil, desert in Australia or the steppes of Asia. In fact I believe that, away from settlements, the Scottish hills are amongst the most pristine landscapes in Europe: there is no evidence, for example, for the fashionable view of a once mighty forest destroyed by humans, or that loss of the main carnivore (the wolf) has significantly altered the vegetation pattern.

The vegetation pattern of the Scottish hills is largely determined by a combination of the natural factors of geology, climate, grazing and the chance associations of the indigenous plants. We humans have never looked at a hill and determined the distribution of the various plant communities, whether snow-bed mosses, montane grassland, heather-clad slopes, peat bogs, *etc.* Certainly on the east coast grouse moors we burn heather which adds an artificial pattern to the landscape, but, in my view, these hills would still be heather moors, burning or not.

The undesigned state of our hills is changing nowadays with large-scale ecosystem planning, particularly the adding of trees to a pattern determined by grant conditions. This is slowly turning the Highland landscape from an undesigned wild one to a designed cultural landscape, resulting, in my view, in a loss of wildness.

Hill land in Argyll which has, to date, managed to escape any tree planting. No-one has ever consciously determined which vegetation type occurs where. Hence an undesigned, mostly wild landscape. Wild land/wilderness as good as any?

The above landscape in Morvern may look natural but is in fact a modern plantation of native trees: hence it is a designed landscape, under the control of humans. A new element of conscious landscape design has been introduced into the area. Future wild land, or no different in terms of wildness to commercial forestry plantations? Is it now wilder through 're-wilding', or has wildness been lost? The answer is dependent on detailed knowledge of the vegetation history of the area.

Re-wilding

Which leads us to 're-wilding', a concept I fundamentally believe in: but only if applied to places where most of the wildness has already been lost, for example lowland Scotland. If much of the Highland landscape away from settlements and excluding modern tree plantations, is already wild, then it does not need 're-'wilding. Adding a design element destroys wildness.

This does not mean that there is not a case for reintroducing elements knowingly made extinct by humans (and which would not have eventually died out naturally), such as wolves. But large scale redesign of such landscapes is an anathema to me: it results in a loss of wildness in an area, the Scottish Highlands, which still has some of the best wildernesses remaining in Europe. But for how much longer?

After all the above, perhaps my definition of wild land (or wilderness, I do not see a difference) combines both ecological wildness and remoteness to come up with something like this:

> "Areas where the indigenous species arrange themselves without human input, and where there are no visible signs of human presence."

Nothing particularly radical here! If I am looking down a microscope at the animals in my gutter, I see no signs of humans. If I raise my eyes and see a wild hillside, likewise. Hence this definition would equally apply to both.

All photos James Fenton

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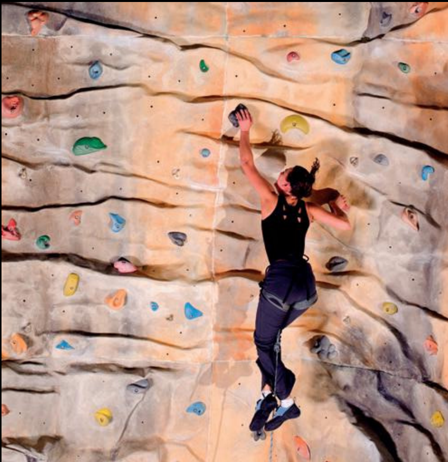
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Liathach by James Fenton

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