

WILD LAND NEWS 61

Autumn 2004



COMMENT

Article

Welcome to the (native) woods. This number of WLN is devoted to the rewooding of the Highlands, and especially Affric where we held our annual field reconnaissance (see AGM report). What are the prospects for restoring native trees and woods to areas from which they have disappeared, and what are the implications for wild land - positive and possibly less positive?

We are delighted to have contributions from Forestry Commission Scotland, who own much of Affric, and are pioneering some remarkably enlightened and radical conservation measures there. And from Trees for Life, who both campaign and implement with great tenacity and care. Malcolm and Alan gave generously of their weekend time to show us what was going on in Affric.

Trees for Life have a vision which extends the Affric 'miracle' to neighbouring western glens such as Cannich and Conon. FCS have of course a much wider remit, both on state forest land and via grant aid. While we wish them both every success in spreading the Affric achievement, there are inevitably some lessons to be learned and the odd note of caution to be sounded. Richard Tipping and his Stirling team, and one of our Steering Team, focus on these in their contributions.

In a future issue we plan to address the first steps taken by our two infant National Parks. But a note of initial disappointment must be sounded as the first draft planning policies begin to emerge from Cairngorms at least. We were alerted via our membership of Scottish Wildlife and Countryside LINK to a policy on hill tracks, which are so blatantly destructive of wild land values.

One might have thought that the magnificent restoration by NTS of the Beinn a' Bhuid track (WLN 50) would set the standard for the new Park. We were amazed to find that the draft policy says almost nothing about the negative aspects of these tracks, other than allude to Adam Watson's famous stance against them. It reads as blandly as though it is East Loafshire's policy on garden sheds, and deals mainly with how to design them to blend in nicely. The whole tone is that hill track development is expected to be a routine thing in the National Park:

- it states that it is in the very nature of the estates to require hill tracks for vehicular access.
- it says tracks will be approved 'where absolutely necessary to serve the needs of estates (sporting, agricultural or forestry) and use by estate staff'. There is no discussion at all on how necessity is tested - so if the estate says it's absolutely necessary that's that settled. With many other forms of development, such as shopping centres, the protagonists devote whole inquiries to the 'need for the development'.
- it doesn't discuss alternatives to hill tracks, nor does it attempt to identify parts of the Park where they may be more acceptable or embargoed completely.

We would like to see a principled stance taken against such tracks - if not here, then there is little hope for the rest of the Highlands. Deer management is perfectly practical in the steeper rougher west where it is physically impossible to bulldoze tracks. The famous Feshie cull was carried out by helicopter. If it is about motoring grouse clients to each butt, then the health benefits of walking up might be pointed out (if walk-to-school is now government policy.). Exceptions might be made where the track is a replacement for a more intrusive one, or where it is temporary and brings some benefit such as timber extraction.

Feel free to make your own comments to the Park Authority - sadly it seems to be bearing out the initial concerns that it was geared to favour local interests (including the big estates) and to exclude expert knowledge, and of course the users from the rest of Scotland who underpin the economics of the Park.

David Jarman

AGM Weekend At Glen Affric And Cannich

Article

A successful AGM weekend was held at Glen Affric and Cannich in early June. The dates coincided with the first Glen Affric/Cannich/Strathglass walking festival so the area was buzzing and the weather was kind.

The main activity on the Saturday was an interesting walk up Glen Affric with expert commentary from Alan Watson Featherstone of Trees for Life, an environmental charity working to restore the forest in the Glen (see www.treesforlife.org.uk for more details). Also with us for some of the time was Sandra from the Forestry Commission Scotland District Office, and we met up with Malcolm Wield, the District Manager in the Slaters Arms later, for a meal.

After the meal, there was a brief AGM followed by a high quality slide show from Alan (as part of the walking festival) with time for discussion and comment after the slides. The next day some SWLG members went up the local hills in Glen Affric whilst others joined another festival walk looking at regeneration work by Trees for Life, including their efforts to encourage Aspen regrowth and propagation.

Trees for Life have achieved a huge amount without owning any land, by just getting on and doing it. They have worked closely with owners, especially the Forestry Commission, over some years, and also the National Trust for Scotland. FCS are to be credited with enabling the involvement of TfL and working well together to make Glen Affric a key reserve of international importance for Caledonian Pinewoods. Thanks to the work by TfL, other private estates are now willing to build links with them and thus spread the word and activity.

The key issue here, as in many parts of Scotland, is grazing pressure - primarily from deer, but also from sheep. In this respect TfL have less power to influence private owners, and FCS can only work as a landowner within the local Deer Management Group. There are different policy objectives on deer control between FCS and many local private estates, and FCS can only do so much on their own. SWLG believes more active direction should come from the Deer Commission on controlling deer numbers, both here and elsewhere in Scotland.

The Steering Team members became aware, during the weekend, of some of the tensions arising from the relatively recent changeover of policy - from establishing plantation commercial forestry to chopping down such plantations, reducing deer numbers on FCS land and encouraging pine, birch, hazel, aspen etc regrowth. The effect of these changes locally, for forestry and estate workers and contractors in respect of employment, investment and policy emphasis, were added to by the slump in international timber prices and resultant falling demand for commercial forestry timber.

TfL are to be credited with maintaining a consistent philosophy in respect of aiming for the regrowth of the Caledonian Pinewood, and also for trying different methods for achieving it. This is dependent upon the extent of existing remaining trees and other vegetation cover as well as grant requirements and land owners' policies. TfL are also monitoring their work and doing much educational and wildlife/plant studies work. Their work on aspen propagation, for example, is attracting interest from many sources.

A short note about the AGM business agenda appears separately, as are thoughts from Steering Team member David Jarman, on the Glen Affric weekend and issues seen and discussed.

Alistair Cant

Highlands in Top Ten

Article

The Scottish Highlands ranked 7th out of a list of 115 tourist destinations graded by experts brought together by National Geographic. The Norwegian Fjords came top of the poll, but Scottish tourism chiefs are very chuffed that the Highlands achieved such a high rating. Perhaps all that wild land we have may be seen in a more attractive light after this survey result.

Forestry and Wild Land in Glen Affric

Article

Malcolm Wield and Alan Stevenson set out some of the radical changes which have been and continue to be made in the practice of forestry as applied on the national forest estate by Forestry Commission Scotland. The article explains and illustrates these changes using Glen Affric as a case study, and sets out how wild land and wild woods are being managed on a significant scale in key places in Scotland.

Introduction

Forestry and wild land in Glen Affric - Phew! Where to begin?

Well, if you still think of forestry and foresters as a threat to wild land, then we've got to communicate more effectively for a start! There is a lot going on with forest management that you will be interested to hear about and which is definitely going in the right direction.

Maybe we should set off with some background on who we are, if only for clarity:

Forestry Commission Scotland

Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) is part of the GB Forestry Commission, a cross border public department, operating within the Forestry Acts. FCS is also the Scottish Executive's forestry department, reporting to the Minister for Environment and Rural Development (currently Allan Wilson). FCS is responsible for regulating all forestry, for advising on and implementing forest policy and for managing the national forest estate.

The Scottish Forestry Strategy published in 2000 sets out the Scottish Executive's forestry policy. The main means of delivery are through regulation, providing incentives, advising and through managing the national forest estate.

Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) manage the national forest estate. FES is an Agency of FCS and was set up on 1 April 2004, following the Forestry Devolution Review.

Following persistent feedback and to avoid confusion to the general public, the name 'Forest Enterprise Scotland' is now retained as an internal distinction only. Outside the office, we always refer to ourselves as Forestry Commission Scotland!

Sustainable forestry and the Forest Planning Approach

Over the past two decades forestry and the role and function of FCS on the national forest estate has changed radically. What we foresters used to do is not what we would do now. Our devotion to plans for wall planting of single species forest began to disappear at least 20 years ago. To my knowledge no forest ploughing has been done in a Forestry Commission forest for over 10 years. These days, foresters see themselves more as stewards of the forest. A bit presumptuous perhaps, but an indicator of the huge sea change that has resulted in places like Glen Affric being valued and nurtured. Equally, foresters are increasingly not just tree technicians - they possess a wide range of land management skills and experience. They are often just a component of multi-skilled teams with ecologists, landscape architects and even in some instances sociologists.

Just as well that our understanding of wildness and natural processes is better than it was. And, in fairness, the need to grow timber as a strategic reserve for wartime has long since gone. Likewise the single-minded desire to see national forests as merely places to grow commercial tree crops in intensively managed plantations. Nowadays the buzzwords are sustainable forest management and multi benefit forestry.

These are not just meaningless bits of jargon. They have real purpose in the way we do things. This is best illustrated by the fact that GB was the first country in the world to have all of its national forests attain the Forest Stewardship Council's green label. This achievement led to the FC being awarded the prestigious global award - 'Gift to the Earth' by WWF in 2003.

Our forests are audited independently, by auditors skilled not just in forest management in a narrow timber production sense, but also in the environmental and social goods and services which forests can provide locally and nationally.

So, nowadays, 'foresters' may be found to have much more in common with 'environmentalists' than you might think. Of course, they are often one and the same thing - and hill walkers or climbers to boot. To many of them, a policy of more sensitive management or non-intervention, to let nature take its course and let's see what happens, is a comfortable philosophy. Working with what are often regarded as degraded ecosystems and cultural landscapes with many competing interests, does though, mean that a more interventionist approach is frequently required.

This requires hard facts on which to base their management decisions and to give their practise a justification. To 'do nothing' is often a brave decision, and often a hopeless one if it is just based on the 'feel good' factor alone.

Thankfully, time - that is to say experience - has brought with it better science and increasing knowledge. So, real hope for the future and real, tangible evidence already on the ground. And no better example than the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve.

Working on the legacy of the past in the Reserve gives few, magic-wand style, instant fixes. And over the past fifty odd years many lessons have been learned - some good and some bad. The non-native conifers that did not prosper and were difficult to harvest have almost all been cut down. The internal fences that served a purpose in managing deer to allow native trees to become established until the deer colonised all the enclosures have virtually all been taken away. Patience and the rifle in the right hands does allow natural regeneration to take place without fences, but is not popular with our sporting neighbours. Planting straight lines,

squares and all other geometric shapes did get trees on the ground but has now been long overtaken by designing forests to fit the landform. In the Reserve, monocultures, larch fire-belts, fertilisers (native forests rarely, if ever, need them), pesticides (native woodlands live with their pests), herbicides and that curious operation formerly known as 'clearing scrub', deep draining, planting peat bogs and timber production through clearfelling only - are things of the past.

Few foresters are sad to see these changes, as they truly see the benefits of ultimately using a less intensive and much more natural approach. It seems the fruits of their labours are nowadays much more welcome with their stakeholders as a result. It feels good to see forests in wild places start to really be, well, proper forests.

If knowledge progresses to show us that wild places should be entirely open natural landscapes of peat then fair enough. No one will argue. I think we have a growing consensus that forests were never formed of 100% trees in the first place. Conversely, it seems sensible to think that wild places were never 100% open space everywhere either.

We know that climate has changed in the past and that it will always change. If the climate has changed we can never restore the past, so why try?

The Affric Management Plan does not seek restoration of 100% tree cover in the glen for this reason. True - it does quite positively aim to safeguard the core ancient woodland and quite understandably expects to allow burgeoning natural regeneration to grow. But in addition it contains a resolve to survey and assess further expansion of woodland on to currently treeless sites where it may be a preferred habitat type, with all the biodiversity that would bring.

What surveys reveal so far is that refugia and mosaic woodland patterns may be much more appropriate. And when you think about it, and if you accept that peatlands and woodlands in nature are not mutually exclusive - and both are very wild environments - then common sense leads you towards where the forest might find itself going.

All that said, it is important to have some form of vision or a strategic direction. Following a major review of native woodlands on the national forest estate in 1993, a new approach to their management was adopted. Over the past decade many millions of pounds have been invested in removing threats - mainly over-grazing, introduced conifers and rhododendrons. This has allowed natural regeneration to prosper. All of this has been achieved through the development of management plans in consultation with stakeholders and implemented through many and varied partnerships.

The Management Plan

This is the place where all contemporary thought about what should happen to a forest comes together - environmental, social and where appropriate economic. The aim is for all national forests to be the subject of a plan and a typical type is a Forest Design Plan (FDP). Most are now in place. All are prepared through dialogue with stakeholders and are the subject of formal consultation and approval by FCS.

In Glen Affric, the FDP has been extended to include plans for the formally designated areas (eg SSSI, cSAC and NNR) too. It is the place where the change of plantations to true forest is detailed and described, where actions and proposals are made for implementation on the ground. The plan describes the objectives for the whole of the National Nature Reserve and its adjacent, conventional forest areas and explains the guiding principles the foresters will use to achieve their goals.

As well as setting out how the trees will be managed it deals with the natural history, landscape and how people make use of the landscape for recreation and education. Glen Affric was one of the first native forests in Scotland to have a recreation plan which helped to improve the visitor experience whilst safeguarding sensitive and valuable habitats and wildlife.

In its series of Appendices, the plan lists all known biological species, archaeological and other records. Glen Affric is managed in a sustainable way and as a pioneering venture contributes greatly towards wider management of the the national forests. In addition it has helped to inform the way ahead for the restoration of native woodlands, not just in Scotland but also internationally - a fact witnessed by the many overseas scientists, foresters and ecologists who visit the Glen.

Purpose and Core Objectives in Glen Affric

In Glen Affric, almost 15,000 hectares have now been designated National Nature Reserve where 'primacy of nature' is recognised in every respect.

A fundamental plank of the plan is the way in which the core objectives of conservation, landscape, recreation, social responsibilities and timber are prioritised. The plan dovetails all of the core objectives with fine tolerance. 'Primacy of nature' has absolute superiority. All other objectives are sub-ordinate to this.

Forest structure of Glen Affric

Glen Affric is divided into 3 broad management zones. Core woodland, transitional habitat and open habitat.

The core woodland contains the ancient, relict pinewood - continuously present on this site since 1760 when it was first mapped. Many veteran trees survive. These old 'grannies' are the heart of the forest and will be allowed to go on indefinitely, until they decide they have reached the end of their 'live' period and change to a still rich eco-niche of decaying lignin. Even in this state they can go probably go on for maybe another 100 years before they collapse, perhaps even longer still in recumbent form as they slowly transform into the forest soil itself. This richness will be supported all around by every cohort of tree and age class imaginable, the trees themselves holding a life web of diversity that we have just started to measure and appreciate.

Core samples have confirmed the oldest 'grannies' so far to be over 350 years old. Interestingly, diameter is no faithful indicator of age - a 100 year old tree is quite likely to be the same size as one 3 times older.

In the relict woodland, fixing age also shows a clear lack of recruitment of young trees between about 250 years ago and 50 years ago. This coincides with the known intensification of grazing patterns in the mid 18th century, and the change to national forest in 1951. Since then, starting with the old 'Pine Reserve' on the south shore of Loch Beinn a Mheadhoin, conservation management has resulted in a steady recruitment of seedlings to the point where all the core woodland and much of the other zones are thriving once again.

Deadwood, that essential barometer of disturbance and a key native woodland habitat, is relatively scarce in Affric. The plan intends to arrest this by leaving all future deceased trees in situ. In the mean time, deadwood will be created in ex-plantation areas and through leaving felled non-native trees on the ground. In this way, the deadwood index will rise everywhere and eventually reach a more 'natural' level. The least disturbed pinewoods of Scandinavia and Europe have deadwood in tremendous abundance - you can hardly walk through the forest in places - something found nowhere in the UK. Affric is our least disturbed UK pinewood of all, which maybe just illustrates the general gulf that has appeared

in our understanding of what's wild and what ain't. Not necessarily good news for unhindered rambling though.

In the open habitat zone, knowledge is to be improved through ground survey. This will determine what open habitats should be conserved for their own merit and what (if anything) should become natural woodland. Some places in this zone have surviving patches or even individual examples of trees that have been protected by enclosure fences, as well as some planting to provide a future seed source for tree species that have entirely disappeared. So far, indications are that future woodland in these areas should be sparse, fragmented and have a more scattered nature than elsewhere.

Affric's woodland is perhaps the best example of a diverse pinewood to be seen anywhere in the UK. This far west, the term 'pinewood' is a euphemism for a whole lot more than just pine. Original, genetically diverse, 'Caledonian' Scots pine trees certainly, but in places just as much birch. There is a preponderance of many more tree species too - alder, willows, hazel, juniper, even oak, wych elm and holly. And an abundance of open space where peat bogland prevails as mire, fen and wet heath. At higher altitude dry heath is more common and the Reserve has an extent of sub -alpine and montane flora. All deliciously tangled together as part of the rich mosaic that gets better and better as the years pass by.

Forest Redesign in Glen Affric

Forest design through landform analysis is the most robust technique foresters have developed to convert standard plantations (not native woods) to genuine forest. This can involve restructuring the layout and internal structure of the woodland. This process designs artificial uniformity out of the forest by removal and replacement of trees in phased periods, the introduction of more open space, the removal of too much shade from natural watercourses and the conservation of semi-natural habitats.

By spreading the felling periods over a long period, typically 30 years, diversity in the structure of the forest is guaranteed and permanent. In many of the conventional plantations around Glen Affric, this process is visibly well underway.

Not all of the more accessible parts will revert to wildness. The most accessible areas of conventional forest adjacent to the Reserve will be replanted with trees for timber. But to keep that in proportion, almost 15000 hectares of the plan area of over 17000 hectares will be allowed to naturalise.

Many of our plantation trees were grown on sites that are very wet and exposed to the wind. Our inheritance of even-age plantations means that some trees would blow over if we work too small scale, so we're sometimes levered into large areas of felling. When these areas regenerate or are replanted though, we accept all seeding native species or take the opportunity to mix the species, change the shape, reduce the size and introduce more permanent open space and light. New trees are planted to fit the landform much more closely and do not jar the eye in the way that the previous plantations did.

Very often, the original choice of species was not the best one for the site. Sometimes sites were planted that should have been left as more important habitat. Lodgepole pine is an example of this in many parts of Scotland, including Glen Affric. On some bogs, no trees should have been planted at all. This wild land is being restored too, for example the ridge running up to Creag Dubh from Loch an Eang in the centre of the Reserve, where extensive work has been done over the last few years.

Much of the cost of redesigning the forest is indirect - felling before maximum growth rate has finished or after it has slowed down for example. Choice of species will affect the volume recovered and the speed of rotation - a decision based on these factors alone will invariably

lead to Sitka spruce. But because the cost is not measured in terms of actual cash, it is quite difficult to estimate what the loss really is.

Historically too, native woodland was removed or underplanted with faster growing conifers. Many of these sites were ancient woodland sites, as at Affric. Proposals in the plan will see all of these restored over time. A lot has been achieved already and recovery has begun. Here the cost is clear. In the Reserve area, £585,000 has already been spent on this operation alone, releasing 1834 hectares 'back into the wild'!

The analogy of making omelettes without breaking eggs comes to mind.

Removing non-native trees from a native woodland can't be done without some impact. If the trees are big enough to be harvested productively, then most of the tree can be taken away as timber. Sometimes, it is urgent to cut trees before they become productive so that ground vegetation can be saved before it is shaded out. This material can not be removed from site without massive cost and is usually left to recycle as compost into the soil. Although this is the best environmental resolution, there can be no doubt that foot access over such sites remains horrible for several years.

We know the material will decompose pretty rapidly in woodland terms - even Sitka spruce has all but vanished after 15 years. In the life of woodland that has been present for perhaps 5000 years, which developed naturally after the Ice Age, hardly any time at all. And yet still impenetrable in the short term. We acknowledge and respect this inconvenience and can only appeal to regarding this as the means to a very worthwhile end.

Fences and Access

The progressive acquisition programme that built up the Forestry Commission's estate in Glen Affric often led to a succession of fences for deer, rabbits and hares. Originally put up for the good reason of protecting young trees, many of the former perimeter fences often became 'internal', as acquisition boundaries merged. Obsolete as such, and also because the trees inside them successfully grew out of harm's way, none of these 'internal' fences will be replaced. Over 70km of them have already been removed, never to return. For the rest, it's only a matter of time and resources. Resources required are considerable, with £69,000 spent to date.

Foresters regard even their perimeter fences as undesirable and temporary. They consider them essential unless (until?) complete deer population range management can be improved to prevent woodland destruction. Only at that time will natural wild land without fences be a realistic aspiration for them. Whole range management frequently involves many land ownerships over a large area. Private land often supports recreational sporting activity and has no land management plan comparable to the forest management plan. Artificially high deer numbers for shooting clearly conflicts with habitat restoration of any sort. Commonality of purpose between owners and foresters remains a Holy Grail.

Things are getting better. The local Deer Management sub-Group have contracted a consultant to draft a collaborative plan for deer population. No easy task, but a draft has been prepared and the signs are good.

Where foresters must persist with fencing, the plan will make the best known assessment of access. Traditional walking routes are increasingly being provided with well-maintained stiles and lesser-known routes progressively respected in the same way. Foresters know they have some way to go with interest groups regarding fences at all, but are especially receptive to local and specific liaison and always seek a practical resolution, even if they at first do need to agree to differ on the principle. Actually, most people can see the difficulties being faced and become supportive, at least in the expectation of progress with the whole range population. Fair enough.

Forest Roads

To achieve much of this work, foresters must create or improve access for their operations and this invariably means forest roads. These are best regarded as a means to an end. Many places will of course continue as productive forests, producing your timber needs from a sustainable source. Perhaps better from here than from a tropical rain forest?

Foresters have a reputation as being 'doers' and by their own nature tend to be people attracted to organising things at a pretty vast scale. Not surprisingly they have over the years had a particular love affair with building water bound (ie unsurfaced) roads to produce the access they need for 40 tonne lorries to take their produce to market. They have become acknowledged experts in this field of such inhospitable terrain and climate. Even the British Army use the road designs and advice of forest civil engineers to carry their heavy armoured vehicles over exercise ranges.

It is unlikely that roading will be any more than minimal in the Reserve and very likely that some roads inserted into the Reserve area during the plantation expansion period will be removed, resources permitting. With the advent of much better definition of wild land, these roads may have a one-off purpose in truly wild places- to remove the climax output volume of the plantation period. Not such a quantum leap then, to see early ideas coming through to effectively de-road those areas afterwards. After all, why go to the expense of indefinitely maintaining an expensive and extensive road network?

Just such an access track put into to one of the remotest parts of Glen Affric some years ago has already been removed and re-covered with its original vegetation. Although the signs are still there, the plantation has gone and over time all trace will disappear, as the native species regenerate. More is certainly possible and the Glen na Ciche track in the western part of the Reserve has to be towards the top of the list. Unfortunately, project resources so far have not extended much beyond emergency restoration for habitat, but opportunities are always being sought. Cost estimates for complete removal are frightening - £40,000 per kilometre, but lower cost options could still be found - covering roads rather than removing them would be substantially cheaper, giving more gain for the £.

Wild Woodland?

Throughout Affric, there is a paucity of evidence to indicate early man had much interest in the glen. Bronze Age and Iron Age sites are virtually absent and mediaeval settlements are rare. A few isolated Modern Age settlements are apparent, but most of these are linked to the relatively recent late 19th or even 20th centuries.

The glen provides a good barometer for the extent of native woodland in the landscape. The mosaic of core, relict woodland around the shore of Loch Beinn a Mheadhoin is rightly claimed to be the least disturbed large pinewood of all and that it deserves its place in the landscape is beyond doubt. Despite its relatively undisturbed heritage though, it survives in a far from natural condition, as at least one period of exploitation in the early 18th century is well documented.

The exploitation itself was principally inspired by the laird trying to keep pace with the rising expectations of the early 1700's. The woods survived though, and for the last 50 years have thrived under benign management. The Forestry Commission purchased the largest part of the woods in 1951.

In sharp contrast lies Glen Cannich, immediately to the north and partly still within the Reserve boundary.. Not too dissimilar in terms of climate or aspect, but with subtle differences in fertility and soils. Dramatically different in terms of biological diversity and degradation, its contrasting social history gives a clue. Glen Cannich has large settlements, field systems and good examples of large corn drying kilns. Settlements sites are more

widespread and are thought to be much older than their contemporaries in Glen Affric, indicating a much more hospitable and sustaining soil. The pattern of settlement and man's more intensive influence have endured through to the present day, unlike Affric.

It would not be a surprise to foresters that Cannich could be regarded as the wilder landscape nowadays, as its open nature is the most familiar and cherished by most people. But there is an awareness that our true impression of wildness in a landscape like Glen Cannich (and there are many others) should naturally include woodland to at least the Affric extent.

The perception of the 'Forest of Caledon' as a massive, unbroken, Amazonian type entity is clearly a myth.

Equally, there can be no doubt that the vast amount of our former native woodland has disappeared from much of the landscape. It seems laudable to suggest it should return - the trick is to decide where and how much?

Some Conclusions

Forestry, FCS and the management of the national forests have entered a new era which is more respectful of nature and more responsive to the needs and aspirations of a much greater and wider range of partners and stakeholders.

There are many lessons to be learned from past experiences and also by adopting a more inclusive approach.

Glen Affric can act as both a test bed and also as a magical and inspirational place not only now but for generations to come.

There is much diversity in Scotland's' forests which can be extended and enhanced through enlightened and more sensitive management. There are many strings to the forest manager's bow, which can help this process - one size definitely does not fit all!

The timescales involved are long in forestry - much longer than in many other land uses or business activities. This requires both vision and patience in large measure, especially when native woods and remote wild places are concerned.

FCS is committed to working in partnerships with stakeholder groups who are able and willing to add value and help deliver the Scottish Forestry Strategy.

A good start has been made in the restoration of wild native woods in places such as Glen Affric but many challenges remain by way of unfinished business. These need to be taken into the future and tackled.

Malcolm Wield is Forest District Manager for Forestry Commission Scotland at Fort Augustus, covering Glen Affric, where he has been based since 1993. His career in forestry began with the Forestry Commission in 1978 and he has held posts in Argyll and Perthshire before moving north of the Great Glen. He is a member of the Institute of Chartered Foresters and enjoys hillwalking and river canoeing.

Alan Stevenson is the FCS Communities, recreation and tourism manager responsible for all aspects of social forestry across the national forest estate in Scotland. He is based in Inverness and has been involved from 1980 with a wide range of the Forestry Commission's business including some important developments such as native woodland restoration and

management, improvements in deer management and also in silvicultural practice and timber harvesting and marketing.

More Hills for Sale

Article

The Vestey family is to put part of their Assynt estate for sale shortly, including the hills of Sulven and Canisp. The land, amounting to approximately 40,000 acres, lies to the south of Lochinver and to the east of land owned by the Assynt crofters.

The local community are actively considering the question of a community buy-out - though to qualify for a right of pre-emption there is a fairly lengthy procedure to follow which may not be completed before the land officially comes on the market. The community could then try to seek special permission from Scottish Ministers for a pre-emptive bid.

The Scottish Wild Land Group would strongly welcome such a community bid. It would complement the Assynt crofters' estate and enable a larger area, including these iconic mountains, to be under community control. This might be expected to result in better deer control, sadly lacking in some estates. Indeed the nearby Inverpolly National Nature Reserve was de-commissioned as a reserve by SNH, we understand, as a result of the failure to agree suitable land management measures including addressing the issues of deer numbers.

Alistair Cant

21 April 2005: The [Assynt Foundation](#) are attempting a community buy-out of 44,000 acres for £3m total. They are appealing for £900,000 by the end of May 2005...

Lingarbay Superquarry Victory

Article

Some months ago, it was announced quietly that the major international quarry company, Lafarge (who took over Redland Aggregates, the original developer) has decided not to appeal any further over the issue of permission to develop a superquarry in south Harris. There has been a tortuous history to this case and we understand that pressure at the international level from Friends of the Earth and WWF has helped in making Lafarge realise that contesting this superquarry further was harming its international reputation.

All credit to those involved, including Sam Galbraith and the Scottish Executive for defending the various appeals. It seems ages ago that the public inquiry was held in Stornoway and Leverburgh, and opponents of the scheme, including the LINK Superquarry Group, took on the might of Redland and its legal team.

Alistair Cant

AGM Report

Article

A brief AGM was held in Cannich in early June. The annual accounts were produced by our Treasurer, Tim, and these were adopted. There was a small surplus of £692 over expenditure for Year to 31 March 2004, and the Balance sheet rose to £6,448. Copies of the Annual Accounts are available from the Treasurer and the Co-ordinator.

The current Steering Team members were all willing to stand again, and as there were no other nominations they were all re-elected. The meeting closed sharply, so that members could attend the evening slide show from Alan Watson Featherstone from Trees for Life.

The AGM of the Cairngorms Campaign is on Saturday 30 October 2004 in Ballater - a date for your diary. For more information ring 01350-727152 or www.cairngormscampaign.org

Glen Affric: the Return of the Wild

Article

Alan Watson Featherstone describes a major project to restore a forest ecosystem.

I first visited Affric in 1979 and, like many people, I was deeply touched by the beauty of the glen. I had not experienced such a unique combination of mountains, lochs, rivers and ancient forest in Scotland before - it reminded me more of landscapes that I had visited in Canada, rather than other places I knew of in my native country. What struck me the most was the relative wildness of the glen. There, it seemed to me, Nature was closer to free expression - what is known in the language of deep ecology as self-willed land - than anywhere else I had come across in the UK.

As a result of numerous visits in the years that followed, I developed a strong personal connection with, and knowledge of, the glen, especially the forested areas. I was particularly inspired by the regeneration of the native pinewoods taking place on the south side of Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin, inside fenced enclosures erected by the Forestry Commission in the 1960s, and was privileged to make several visits to the glen with Finlay MacRae, the forester who was the driving force behind those projects. I could also see the potential for further regeneration of the forest in other areas of the glen, so when Trees for Life was founded, Affric became an initial focal point for our forest restoration work.

In 1990 we implemented our first major project, when, in partnership with the Forestry Commission (and with grant aid from the Nature Conservancy Council, now Scottish Natural Heritage), we funded a 50 hectare deer-fenced enclosure at Coille Ruigh an Cuileige. This area contains the largest extent of native pinewood on the north side of Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin, and the enclosure is still unique amongst those on Forestry Commission land in Affric in that it is exclusively for natural regeneration of the trees - no other management has been done there. A survey carried out by a student from Edinburgh University before the fence was erected concluded that there were approximately 100,000 Scots pine seedlings inside the area to be fenced, and their average age was 9.9 years and their average height a mere 8.5 cm. There were also numerous (but uncounted) seedlings of broadleaved trees such as birch and rowan, and they, plus the pines, have grown well in the years since the fence was completed, with some trees now over 5 metres tall.

It's not just the trees that benefit from this protection from excessive grazing. Coille Ruigh is one of the best places in Glen Affric to find creeping lady's tresses, a rhizomatous orchid associated with the native pinewoods. Over the years since the fence was put up, creeping lady's tresses has spread and increased there, and in August this year I saw literally hundreds of them amongst the pines on the ridge there. Outside the fence, however, just fifty metres away on the same ridge, I could only find a single solitary orchid. The regenerating trees at Coille Ruigh and other enclosures we've been involved with are now supporting increasing populations of phytophagous insects, which in turn are food for birds etc. Thus, we can see that the whole process of ecosystem unravelling in Affric has been reversed, and indeed a veritable reweaving of the web of life is taking place.

Impact of sheep and deer

Like much of the Highlands, Glen Affric was managed for most of the past two centuries to support large (and ecologically-unsustainable) populations of large herbivores, namely sheep and red deer. At one stage there were 30,000 sheep in the glen, and although they are all gone now, their impact, and that of the deer which remain, continues to have a profound effect on the vegetation and the land. This is obvious not only in the large generation gap in

the ages of the trees (there were very few pines younger than 100 years old until restoration efforts began in the 1960s), but also through the compaction of the soil into numerous parallel hoof tracks on many of the open hillsides.

The cumulative effects of this are the suppression of the natural growth of all the vegetation communities in the glen, and the deer numbers are still too high to allow any recovery in unprotected areas. However, as soon as the grazing pressure is reduced or removed by deer-fenced exclosures, dramatic results follow. For example, from 1994 onwards we implemented a series of 10 exclosures on West Affric in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland, who own that 4,000 hectare property at the headwaters of the Affric watershed. Now, just a few years later, the difference in vegetation growth for plants such as bog myrtle and heather between the inside and the outside of the fences is so substantial that it is easily visible from the hills on the other side of the glen. We've also erected several small areas of stock fencing around eared willow seedlings beside the Affric River on West Affric, to help facilitate the restoration of the riparian vegetation community, and this year I was astonished and delighted to find bluebells flowering in one of those. These were blossoming beside a lush growth of ferns in the shade of an eared willow bush and they provided a spectacular contrast with the close-cropped, overgrazed barrenness of the surrounding land. I suspect it may be centuries since bluebells last flowered on West Affric, and their return now is a potent symbol of what Nature can do when we allow her free expression.

In all the work which we do, we seek to follow the axiom of 'letting Nature be our guide'. Close observation of the land over extended periods of time is invaluable in building up a sense of what self-willed land means for an area like Affric. Bluebells reappearing on West Affric are an indication of this, as is the presence of seedling trees there, and especially further east in the glen. Similarly, when we plant trees we do this in ways which replicate as closely as possible the process of natural regeneration, using seed collected from trees growing nearby, and planting in soil types and vegetation conditions where those tree species already occur elsewhere in the glen. Planting is done in a non-linear pattern, with clumps of trees and open space between them, so that the distribution of trees matches that of naturally-regenerating forest as closely as possible.

How much natural forest?

There are, of course, discussions about how much forest there should 'naturally' be in Affric, and what the species composition of the forest should be. Historical evidence, such as the palaeoecological studies carried out on West Affric, can provide some important pointers in this direction, but the message contained in the land itself today, through the presence of heavily-overgrazed seedlings of trees and other plants, must also be factored in. For an area like West Affric, we will probably never know how much forest there would have been there today if humans had not lived in and altered the landscape for thousands of years. What is incontestable is that there would have been more forest than exists at present, and the trees would have flourished alongside with other vegetation communities, such as grasslands, peat bogs, and indeed, bog woodland.

It was Aldo Leopold, the American forester and early advocate of wilderness, who said: "The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to save all the parts." The alteration of the Scottish landscape by humans, directly and indirectly, over millennia took place without the benefit of Leopold's insight, and today we live with the consequences of that. Most of Scotland's large mammal species are extirpated, and the ecosystems which covered much of the country - natural forests - have either been completely removed or reduced to small isolated stands of old trees. All our terrestrial ecosystems, including forests, survive today in an impoverished condition, and in most cases are unable to return to natural health and balance because of ongoing human activities, and specifically the pressure of too many large herbivores. Any serious attempt at rewilding in Scotland, at returning some of the country to a condition of self-willed land, must therefore address these issues.

A self-sustaining ecosystem

At Trees for Life, our approach to rewilding is one in which we seek to put back into place the pieces of the ecosystem which are necessary for it to become self-sustaining and therefore self-willed again. Our starting point for this has been to catalyse an expansion of the native forests by facilitating the natural regeneration of the existing forest remnants.

Complementing this, we also plant trees, in sites which are selected for their ecological suitability, and where regeneration is unlikely to occur because of the absence of an existing seed source. While those trees (both planted and naturally-regenerating) are growing, we advocate a substantial reduction in the grazing pressure, through the removal of sheep from areas where forest restoration is desired and a reduction in the numbers of deer to a level at which natural regeneration of the trees, and indeed all the vegetation, becomes possible without the need for further planting or the use of more fences. In the longer term, we also advocate the return of all the missing mammal species, including the predators, as they are essential components of healthy ecosystems. Indeed, we believe that we will never have self-sustaining ecosystems, and therefore self-willed land, until all the parts of the ecosystems, and especially the top predators, are back in place again.

In Glen Affric, our initial efforts focused on achieving the natural regeneration and expansion of the existing forest remnants, particularly the native pinewoods. In subsequent years, our work has diversified and deepened to include the restoration of more of the forest ecosystem - the montane scrub community at the treeline, the riparian vegetation zone, the scarce trees (such as aspen, hazel, holly and juniper) and the woodland ground flora. We are also putting back in place key parts of the ecosystem that are needed for some of the extirpated mammals species. Thus, we are implementing regeneration and restoration measures for the stands of aspen trees that occur around the shores of Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin. This will not only benefit the rare insect, fungi and lichen species that are dependent on aspen, but also, because aspen is the preferred winter food of the European beaver, it will provide a more suitable habitat for a possible return of beavers to Affric at some stage in the future. Other work we're involved with, which is equally important for bringing back an enhanced quality of wildness, includes the removal of redundant fencing wherever possible, and we also advocate the removal and re-landscaping back to natural contours of some of the tracks and forest roads in the glen.

In a larger context, it is not ultimately a natural forest that is the primary goal of our restoration work. Instead, we seek to restore a healthy self-sustaining and dynamic ecosystem, complete with all its natural processes of herbivory, predation, parasitism, occasional large-scale natural disturbance such as wild fires, windthrow, insect infestations etc. Such a goal is obviously a long term one, but it is only by aiming for such an outcome, we believe, that we may have truly wild, self-willed land again in the Highlands.

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Trees and wild land values in West Glen Affric: a personal view *Article*

by Richard Tipping, Althea Davies & Eileen Tisdall, University of Stirling

How extensive were Scotland's forests? How has the tree cover varied over the millennia with periods of climate change? What is the natural balance between trees and peat? What impact have humans had? The authors examine the issues in the context of native woodland restoration in Glen Affric.

West Affric and wilderness values

To the north of the Great Glen and west of Cannich, in the heart of the northern Scottish Highlands, are two starkly contrasting landscapes within the same broad strath of Glen Affric. In the east and centre of the glen are the extensive, highly prized and internationally renowned Scots pine and pine-birch woodlands, managed for their contribution to biodiversity by Forest Enterprise, our most recent National Nature Reserve. West of these are the open and almost treeless hills, mountains and Munros of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) owned West Affric Estate. Neither landscape is natural, and neither can be seen as wilderness, and yet the myths persist. The Affric pinewoods invoked one of the more famous aphorisms in Scottish conservation, "to stand in them is to feel the past" (Steven & Carlisle in 1959), and this tangible contact with a past 'golden age' unsullied by human impacts has been used subliminally and purposefully to justify nature conservation and encouraged the new scientific and philosophical disciplines of restoration ecology. To restore is to replace: but what are we restoring? How do we know what to put back? Do we need to restore or can we choose a new future? If we choose to restore, how faithful to the past must we be?

Past Landscapes and the West Affric Forest Restoration Initiative

Andrew Bachell has summarised the motives behind the partnership between the NTS, Millennium Forests for Scotland (MFS) and Trees for Life that led in the 1990s to an initiative to restore woodland to West Glen Affric. Our role at Stirling University, funded through both the NTS and MFS, was to supply data on whether woodlands had ever grown in the west of the glen, what the woodlands looked like, identify what had happened to these woods, when and how they had disappeared and why their absence today is so complete when only a few kilometres eastward are some of the finest semi-natural woods in Scotland, and to aid in future management by understanding what had happened in the past.

To understand what had happened in West Glen Affric, we had to reconstruct through time - the last 11500 years or so of the present interglacial - the history of plant communities and soils, the impacts of past human communities and the variability of past climate. Between 1996 and 2000 we sampled peat and lake sediments throughout the glen. Althea Davies identified pollen grains accumulating in stratigraphic sequences and used these to reconstruct changes in the natural vegetation, as well as how people altered this. Eileen Tisdall explored past changes in climate, principally in rainfall since this factor is most influential in the Highlands, from measuring how the level of a small lochan had risen and fallen and measuring how peat surfaces became wetter and drier through time. These separate analyses were all dated by the radiocarbon (¹⁴C) method, supported by the Natural Environment Research Council. The objectives, methods and results have been and are being published.

What we found from these scientific analyses surprised the NTS, challenged and overturned many of the assumptions about landscape history that had driven the reforestation policy, created an inevitable complexity to planning from this improved knowledge base, and presented some awkward choices. We will briefly describe these findings before, in the final section, developing a personal view as to how this vastly increased knowledge of West Affric has been and might be used.

We found that:

- West Glen Affric indeed once had a rich and diverse woodland, established by 10000 years ago
- this woodland bore little relation to the pine-rich woods to the east, despite the apparent abundance of pine stumps preserved in peat, but was dominated by deciduous trees like birch, rowan, hazel, willow and alder
- the structure and composition of the woods varied over short distances in a highly complex mosaic determined by soil type and hydrology

- fluctuating climates in the first 3000 years of the present interglacial allowed pine trees to periodically penetrate westward and to compete with birch, but that at other times the woods were enriched in trees like oak and, probably, elm
- changes to wetter climates early in the interglacial may have triggered very extensive blanket peat growth. Alternatively, blanket peat is simply the soil that inevitably develops in this wettest corner of Europe, but its spread was not caused by human mismanagement of this landscape
- peat covered most surfaces by 7000-6000 years ago, but for around 2000-3000 years ago the woods grew alongside and on blanket peat: peat and trees were not mutually exclusive
- in a very short period lasting less than 500 years around 4300-3800 years ago regeneration in the different woodland mosaics throughout the glen, in all niches, failed.
- this collapse appears to have been a dramatic failure of trees to regenerate, probably caused by very marked changes in climate, still poorly defined but probably involving marked seasonal fluctuations in temperature and storminess
- woodland decline had initially nothing to do with the impacts of early farming communities, but the natural replacement of trees by open grasslands and heath encouraged early Bronze Age pastoralists to colonise and settle in the glen
- these and later farmers lived within a landscape that was already difficult to farm because acid soils and blanket peat were through natural processes already dominant when they arrived 3800 years ago. Because these communities maintained a low-risk agriculture they could survive intense later prehistoric and historic periods of climatic deterioration
- this low-risk agriculture included the cultivation of barley in localities like alluvial fans where soil nutrients could be maintained by flooding, although livestock were probably always more important
- farmers have not caused the damage to these fragile environments that we commonly assume, and it is very likely that people lived with, and not in opposition to, their environment
- some trees survived the woodland decline, and a few were still there 650 years ago when they were lost to agriculture, but whether these scattered individuals could be described as woodland after 3800 years ago is debateable.

Past landscapes and choices for the future

There is of course no requirement to use knowledge of the past as the basis of decision making in nature conservation. We can create new 'natural' landscapes which have no need to reflect its past. However, many justifications for nature conservation have implicitly or explicitly drawn on history, from Fraser Darling's emotive but rather wayward and misinformed assumptions of human-driven landscape destruction to the present. Purported anthropogenic abuses and misuses have become a major factor in arguing for the restoration or repair of this damage, but as a consequence of our analyses in West Glen Affric, this argument retains very little validity for this landscape. We have demonstrated that the extensive peatlands that Fraser Darling disparagingly described as 'wet desert' are natural; far from a product of human mismanagement this nutrient impoverished soil is what nature deals. We have argued that woodland loss was also initiated naturally, and in common with other analyses in northern Scotland, was induced by climatic change. Our study has emphasised how people in the past lived with what nature dealt, and showed no rapacious tendencies. If guilt over people's former destructive tendencies motivates conservation values, there is no need for guilt in West Glen Affric.

Andrew Bachell argued that the replacement of less natural landscapes with 'wild woodlands' was a major objective of the planting scheme in West Glen Affric. However, our data show that future woodlands will not replace a landscape less wild and natural, because the heath and blanket peat that will be displaced is itself natural in origin. This must lead us to question the values which seem to place woodland above open heath in this part of Scotland. James

Fenton has also argued that woodland is not the natural end-point of landscape development in the highlands, and so should not be automatically presumed to be the desired aim of restoration: our data strongly support this view.

The recognition that initial woodland loss occurred through climatic change allows us to ponder the wisdom of extensive woodland restoration at a time of increasing climatic variability. Our data allow us to argue that the tree species recommended for West Affric in initial plans, in particular the much-treasured Scots pine, had very little relevance in former woodlands here, and indeed were highly vulnerable to environmental change. It has led us to query the expense of planting programmes, fencing and fertilising for seedlings that may not survive the next decade. Other trees will grow, although the ethical and practical issues of enclosing the trees, described by others in this volume, and the increasing need to come to terms with deer populations, have still to be resolved. Whether trees ever expand from these enclosures and their improved soils remains to be seen. And whether people will ever come to regard these trees as other than artificial transplants also remains to be seen.

Richard Tipping is a palaeo-ecologist at Stirling University with a particular interest in the development of woodlands in Scotland since the end of the last ice age, and its response to climate changes and human interventions. Althea Davies and Eileen Tisdall have carried out detailed investigations in Glen Affric under Richard's guidance.

Further Reading

For a discussion of the relevance of history to the authenticity of the new native woodland programme in Scotland, and to read Andrew Bachell's and our views on the debate, you can obtain a copy of 'Tipping, R. (ed) Using the Past in the Future of Scotlands New Native Woodlands. St. Andrews: Scottish Woodland History Discussion Group Notes IV, from the Secretary of the AHRB Centre for Environmental History at Stirling University FK9 4LA.

To pursue the scientific analyses from our work in West Glen Affric you can order this book from the Publications Secretary of the QRA (qra.org.uk): Tipping, R. 2003. *The Quaternary of Glen Affric & Kintail*. London: Quaternary Research Association. 217 pp.

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Wood Notes Wild

Article

As you progress beyond the head of Loch Affric into the wilder and bleaker glen proper, there hangs up on the south side a slanting side valley, hard to see against the light and obscured by shapeless foothills. No path leads to the well-hidden stalkers footbridge, although it is only a step from Athnamulloch, its springing ribs of massive schist boldly sculpted by ice and then by the eddying Allt na Ciche. From it I have twice made my trackless way up into the mouth of Fraoch-choire, on route to the cone of the Mullach which stands precisely above its head. This is the finest approach to one of our best 1100m peaks, but invisible to the guide writers because it is felicitously split over three maps.

On the way in, as so often, there are a few scraggy birches clinging to crag or gorge, and in the first flush of April some seedlings in the short grass hint at the verdant glen this could be without so many herbivores. On the way out, after a spine-tingling circuit over A' Chralaig, wildness ceases abruptly in the greatest tributary of Affric, secluded because devious and blind-headed, Gleann na Ciche; for it has been roaded and filled with young and alien conifers.

Or this was the story only twenty years ago. Since then two miracles have occurred that were beyond foreseeing. The conifers have been 'felled-to-waste' ('felled-to-recycle' is the well-

spun term now preferred !), and within their fences are vigorous birch and rowan thickets. And those scraggy birches now reside within an extensive network of exclosures, so that their progeny, no longer nipped in every bud, are spreading rapidly.

These are remarkable achievements, rare beacons of hope against the taming of wild Scotland. They are all the greater for being achieved by our oft-maligned Forestry Commission on its own commercial estate; the story is told by other contributors. Without detracting from the overall success, there are of course issues to be debated as we encourage emulation.

Fencing

By definition, fences are the antithesis of wildness. Admirers of Ian Hamilton Finlay (who will have recognised the borrowed title for this piece) will know his address to a similar dilemma.

Thesis:	fence
Antithesis:	gate
Synthesis:	stile

If our thesis is 'wild wood' and our antithesis is 'wild deer' (not to mention the sheep which come over from Ceannacroc), perhaps IHF would approve of the synthesis being the hunter/shepherd. I am indebted to my brother (in the other National Trust) for this glaringly simple nostrum. While fencing creates intermittent contract work which may or may not go to local people, it would be good to see a shepherd/stalker or two resident at Athnamulloch again (at least until we get the wolves back.).

Talking to Keith Miller of JMT over anti-midge fires at Inbhir Dhorrcail brings home how vexing a challenge this is. On Knoydart, he believes the miles of fencing should be removed even before it rots, allowing the native deer back in to browse the oaks I planted, providing their numbers are managed as a sustainable resource for the whole community, at levels which will allow some 'natural' level of continuing regeneration over the longer term.

Here in Affric, and in less-sensitive wild places which would naturally be better wooded, I am prepared to put up with a certain amount of fencing to kick start a process where this is politically necessary to win support and show some results, but early removal must be written in. The ideal is fenceless woodland regeneration.

Planting

When I planted my wee oaks and pines in Knoydart, I confidently predicted that when I returned in ten years, there would be a flourishing jungle of - birch and rowan. Last summer, I proved myself nearly right. By dint of much scrambling in the scrub, I found enough of the Planted Ones to feel I had left some mark, but it will be a long time before they are visible across Loch Hourn. Would they have arrived of their own accord, on a more natural timescale of centuries? Does it matter?

On that shapeless lower ground which obscures Fraoch-choire, Trees for Life have planted Scots pine. They have done it beautifully, with a good eye for the terrain, in an authentically random scatter (the hardest pattern to plan). It is remarkable to see many of them establishing vigorously, on ledges and knolls. But there are no old native pines left this far west in Affric, and I wonder how we will feel in fifty years, knowing they were planted to fulfil a dream of restoring the 'natural' pinewoods to places from which they have long been absent. Richard Tipping writes cogently on this elsewhere in this issue.

The north side of west Glen Affric is now owned by NTS, and they have fenced one medium chunk, fairly unobtrusively, to allow relict birch a chance to regenerate. I asked James Fenton (our host for last year's AGM) about this 'political' dilemma of having to show quick results. He says "I cannot see what planting trees has to do with 're-wilding'; such obvious intervention management in a previously unmanaged landscape (although not necessarily unused), with prescriptions for more woodland and woodland species, is the antithesis of letting the land go wild! To let the land be truly wild we have to get rid of our preconceptions and see what nature comes up with: it may be trees, but it may not be; why worry? However, the current soils and climate indicate that nature will come up with large herbivore populations and an open moorland landscape that is unique in European terms, and one of the wildest (in terms of vegetation pattern) in Europe. Let us be proud of that, and not let our atavistic chimpanzee inheritance make us see trees as the acme of ecology!"

Stirring stuff, to which I would only add that the herbivore population might be rather larger today than nature would come up with. Both James and Keith are talking the new language of 'indeterminacy', or not trying to engineer predetermined landscape and ecological outcomes to suit our current tastes - Adam Smith would approve. Actually, as a planner to trade, I know one of the toughest challenges is to create the circumstances in which good things can flourish spontaneously, with a minimum of regulation and intervention. It can be done - see Lowland Crofting in West Lothian.

Tracks

When I climbed the Mullach, I could choose my own line up into Fraoch-choire at will. For many of us, this is the essence of the 'freedom to roam', on lower ground as well as the high plateau. A few years back, I revisited the corrie to examine its remarkable landslide tongue, and found all the fencing going in. Now there was less freedom, and an awkward crossing or two. This year, our AGM walk found the vegetation within the fenced compartments splendidly lush - which means that it is now impractical to follow any route other than the path.

And why is there a path, which follows an annoying pigeon-flight up and down every knoll and dip? Because quad vehicles were used to get the fencing squad in, and blazed a trail which is now indelible because the lush vegetation channels everyone onto it. They even took a machine in to excavate safe passages across steep side slopes - including the toe of the landslide (handy for geologists wanting to see inside it, but not good practice in wild land).

Of course, access into the recesses of Gleann na Ciche was also greatly aided when the forest road was built. Indeed I biked up it, saving 6 km of dull trudge when I explored the shrinking ridge of A' Chioch. I asked Malcolm Wield of FCS if he had any plans to remove it. He would love to - if someone provided the funds. I think this should be urged as a priority - why leave incomplete the landmark achievement of removing the commercial plantations by leaving the road in the middle of this remote glen?

Did I say remote? It is, if you have to bike in from the public car park, as I have every time except on our AGM visit (such privilege!). But on the strictest SNH test of remoteness, the whole of Glen Affric fails to count as 'wild' because of the landrover track to the youth hostel at Alltbeithe.

A final perversity: our splendid AGM walk with 'Trees for Life' Alan took advantage of an unfenced gap between the fell-to-waste and the new enclosure. We picnicked amongst a few of those scraggy old birches, on short-cropped slopes. Our botanists and entomologists were in seventh heaven, and I learned more wildflower names and boring-insect habits than I ever knew before. The herbivore-free places seemed duller by comparison, and rank ungrazed vegetation may suppress the more delicate plants until a more natural balance can be permitted to evolve.

So let us have many more Affric rewildings, but let us approach them humbly and allow nature its fullest say, in both space and time.

Oh, and just in case you think I am a hopeless purist like Hamish Brown (of Carnach River crossings), I found the footbridge over the pool of polished schist had been handsomely replaced - and rejoiced.

David Jarman