

Inflammatory post from Rothiemurchus on pinewoods, fires and campers,

Description

“It is not felling or fire that destroys a pine wood, but overgrazing of the ground beneath and beyond, whether by sheep or by deer.” Chris Smout

On Thursday Rothiemurchus made a Facebook [post](#) of a burning granny pine and the following comment:

“A sad day on Rothiemurchus today. One of our beautiful 250 year old granny pines, beside the Lily Loch, was burnt down by selfish campers. Not only that, they chopped down two old birch trees to provide fuel for their fire! Luckily we had a team out very early moving cattle who saw the smoke, alerted the fire brigade and went straight to the scene. They arrived to find the campers had scarpered and the tree engulfed in flames. Their quick actions prevented the fire spreading further which would have destroyed surrounding woodland and wildlife in this protected area. These campers have not only broken the law, they have behaved in a shockingly irresponsible way. We would ask people to think very carefully before they do anything which could impact upon an environment which takes hundreds of years to recover. It’s only a tiny proportion of visitors who behave stupidly and we are extremely grateful and thank all those who help care for this special place.”

While I personally hate to see trees burned in acts of vandalism, the post – whether deliberately or not – has inflamed public opinion in the social media world with over 650 written comments and 3.5k likes/reactions. The largest proportion of these express disgust and a desire for retribution for whoever did this with calls to lock the people up and even “burn them” – this is social media after all. A few, predictably, are asking for camping bans but it is good to see a larger number try and draw a line between responsible campers and vandals. Indeed a few question how the estate can be sure it was campers who had done this when the people concerned had “scarpered” and the birch trees cut down with a heavy saw that most campers would never carry. The estate has responded by affirming it was campers (as though to emphasise that this is the important fact) though to be fair it does say only a small minority of people behave like this.

The reaction has been focussed on the burning of the tree rather than the wider significance of this. I find it interesting that there appears more public concern at present about the damage to one tree than the systematic destruction going on up the road at Cairngorm or the systematic muirburn that takes place on grouse moors.

The Rothiemurchus post did not help put matters in perspective by claiming that the environment takes hundreds of years to recover after fire or similar acts. This is simply not true. Indeed it says so in their own Forest Plan:

“Visitors may be left with the impression that the pinewood of Rothiemurchus is an untouched wild wood, but this is a myth. In fact the Rothiemurchus woodlands exist today because of their ability to regenerate, having probably been clearfelled twice, and not because they were spared by the axe” (Smout & Lambert, 1999)

Moreover, fire is one of the most important ways in which the Caledonian pine woods regenerate. Chris Smout, made the point succinctly in the inaugural Royal Scottish Forestry Society “The History and the Myth of Scots Pine” ([see here](#)) which is essential reading for anyone interested in the pinewoods:

“Accidental or deliberate fires also sometimes devastated pinewoods, but again they usually caused no lasting damage as pine readily regenerates after a fire.”

The ecology of this that older pines are quite resistant to fire (unlike other trees like birch) while pine seedlings do not germinate or grow well under extensive vegetation. Burn the vegetation and the pine seedlings have a chance to grow. The problem is not fire itself – it has been actively used by the RSPB at Abernethy ([see here](#)) to promote regeneration and indeed the Rothiemurchus Forest Plan has a section on the use of fire in regeneration – but its overuse. Burn a bit of moorland once, and trees will regenerate, but burn it over and over again as they do on grouse moors and they have no chance. I find it ironic that Rothiemurchus is claiming that the burning of one tree is a threat to the environment when elsewhere on the estate, beyond an artificial forest boundary, muirburn is practised and is preventing the expansion of the pine wood:

“Thanks to the Rothiemurchus Estate who manage the land, we were able to see the heather in different stages of growth due to recent muirburn management. Muirburn is a way of managing the moorland to create patches of heather at all different stages of growth – essential to maintaining a healthy and abundant grouse population.” (<http://getoutadventures.co.uk/blog/>)

The best way to mitigate the consequences of a large fire in a place like Glenmore is to expand the extent of the forest and in that respect Rothiemurchus has been part of the problem because of its muirburn practices.

Unfortunately, people do not seem to appreciate that the likelihood of a large fire in Glenmore is almost inevitable as a result of current conservation initiatives. If you allow a forest to develop with only very limited human intervention, the ground cover will increase and at some stage, in dry weather, there will be an extensive fire. This could happen naturally through a lightening strike or could be triggered by humans, whether accidentally or deliberately. This does not make those conservation initiatives a bad thing, rather the contrary, but as Smout notes, in the past human management of the pine forest (clearing areas of timber and so creating fire breaks and removal of ground vegetation for various purposes) reduced these risks. Allow nature primacy, as we have seen in the US and Australia, and eventually you will get a huge fire. Such fires of course are much more common in those countries, in part due to the climate, but to think they will not happen here is to put your head in the sand. At some point, a whole lot of granny pines are going to burn but we should despair or condemn too much, the woodland will regenerate. Personally I believe this outcome to be preferable to what is happening in much of the rest of Scotland where overgrazing has reduced the likely impact of fires to negligible proportions but has been slowly strangling the pinewoods as the granny pines die one by one.

None of this means I condone people setting trees alight or that, because a large fire will happen at some point, I believe it would have been okay if the fire had spread in this case. If we are going to allow natural processes to dominate certain areas – which is what I would like to see – it would be preferable that disasters should happen naturally, rather than being created by human foolishness. In the case of fire, this means fires caused by lightening strikes rather than chainsaw wielding vandals.

We will not though, I believe, ever get rid of human foolishness/irresponsibility entirely and we should not use that foolishness, as some people have in this case – and as Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority are proposing to do with their camping byelaws – as a reason to remove people's right to enjoy nature or simply an excuse to get people off the land. Camping should be part of the right to enjoy nature. To defend that right we need to increase people's understanding of ecological processes and expose the hypocrisy of those who are only too happy to condemn certain acts of irresponsible behaviour while turning a blind eye to the much greater destruction that is going on elsewhere.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. camping
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