

SNH's plans for the Invereshie National Nature Reserve – gardening in the Cairngorms?

Description



The Inshriach and Invereshie National Nature Reserve from a couple of km west of Achlean showing contrast between plantation forestry, on land owned by Forestry Commission Scotland, and the naturally regenerating pinewood on the slopes above owned by SNH

SNH are currently consulting on a new plan for the Invereshie and Inshriach National Nature Reserve ([see here](#)). The NNR covers the land between the road up the east side of Glen Feshie (and the moor of Feshie) and the fine ridge which extends from Carn Ban Mor over Sgurr Gaoith to Creag Dubh. The consultation is open until the 17th May and SNH's plans raise some fundamental issues about nature

conservation. More specifically, they raise questions about whether there is anywhere, even in our National Parks, where natural processes should be allowed to take their course without human intervention. What SNH appears to be proposing at Invereshie is that the best example of a natural and regenerating tree line in Scotland should be “improved” by human planting.

The background

The Nature Conservancy bought Invereshie, the SNH part of the NNR, in 1954 the same year as the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve was created because it provided one of the best examples of untouched Caledonian Pine Forest in Scotland. Indeed, before the creation of the National Park, the montane scrub zone at Creag Fhiaclach was often cited as the only example of a natural tree line in Scotland. Invereshie then formed part of the Cairngorms NNR and was managed as part of that much wider whole until 2006 when the Cairngorms NNR was wound up and replaced by a number of smaller NNRs, including Invereshie. At Invereshie it was decided ([see here for SNH Board paper](#)) to extend the NNR to include a strip of the Inshriach Forest owned by the Forestry Commission which had been planted but which was being converted to more conservation oriented forestry. This has required intensive intervention to remove alien conifers and restore areas of bog woodland. As the photo shows, its still very much work in progress.

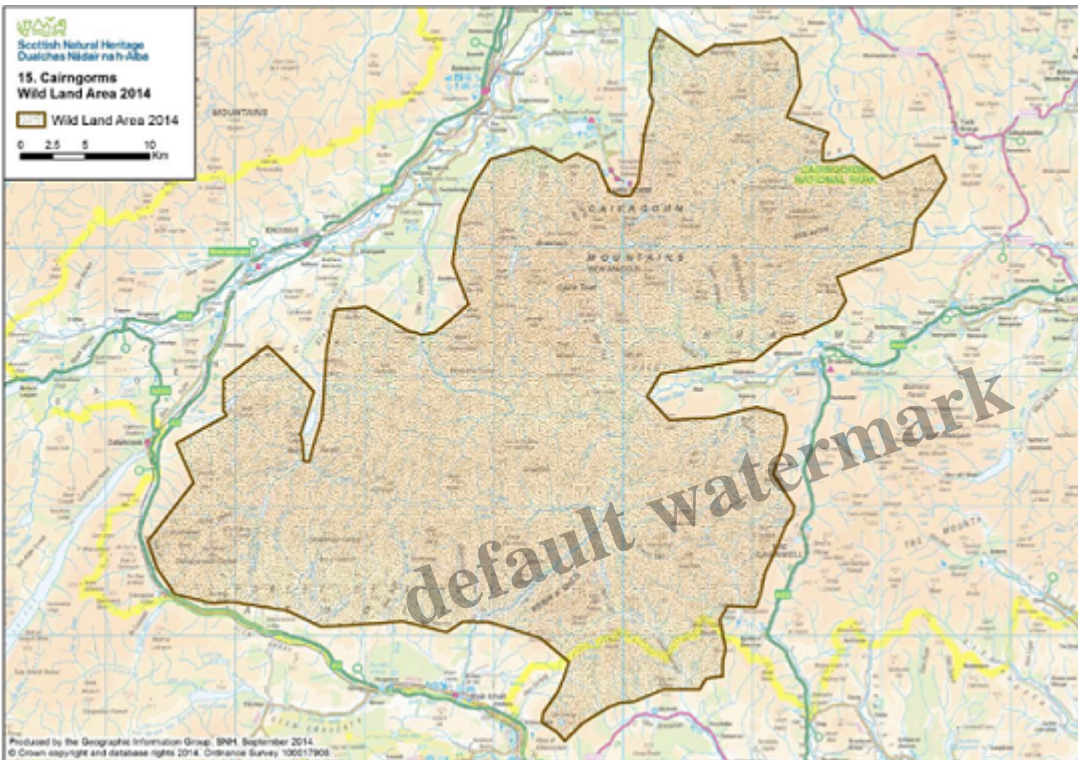
As with the Corrie Fee NNR consultation ([see here](#)) the consultation documents contain a welcome and very useful history of the area. What is lacking from the history however is any explicit critical analysis either of past mistakes (the fence between Inshriach and Invereshie or how when the stalking was let to private interests they failed to control deer numbers effectively) or the role Invereshie played in the conservation of the wider whole of the central Cairngorms. Had this been properly considered, the importance of Invereshie’s natural tree line might have been given due recognition in the consultation – instead its glossed over and opens the way for the planting proposal.

The Inshriach and Invereshie NNR has now joined Cairngorms Connect ([see here](#)) which was set up to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach between land managers. It also involves Glenfeshie Estate, the RSPB at Insh Marshes and Abernethy, and Forest Enterprise and is billed as the largest habitat restoration project in the UK. It aims to deliver landscape scale conservation outcomes including woodland expansion, peatland restoration and river restoration and is in a sense a partial replacement for the Cairngorms NNR though significantly does not include the Mar Lodge Estate owned by National Trust for Scotland. While the willingness of these land owners to work together is very welcome, unlike the old National Nature Reserve there is no public accountability and, as far as I can see no overall plan. This makes it difficult to see how SNH envisages the draft Invereshie NNR plan fitting into the wider whole although it claims to wish to do so:

Invereshie & Inshriach is one of a suite of nine Cairngorms NNRs lying within, or adjacent to, the Cairngorms National Park. It is therefore also important that the objectives for the Reserve are viewed in the context of the wider landscape of and aims and objectives of the Park. The Cairngorms National Park Plan (2007) recognises this and identifies NNRs as “key places for information transfer and interpretation”. In partnership, the suite of Cairngorms NNRs is managed collaboratively so that they may better contribute to the collective achievement of the four aims of the Park.

Wild Land and Invereshie

While SNH's consultation documents state the NNR is covered by a number of European designations and also falls within the Cairngorms National Scenic Area, they fail to say that the higher ground, including all the Munro summits and tops, also forms part of the Cairngorms Wild Land Area.



SNH drew up statements for every Wild Land area in Scotland and what the statement for the Cairngorms Wild Land Area has to say about “naturalness” is very interesting:

- **Open native woodlands of diverse spatial and visual characteristics that respond directly to the underlying physical conditions, contributing strongly to the sense of naturalness**

Native woodlands occur around the fringes and within some of the glens of this WLA. Where unfenced and comprising trees of varied age and spacing as well as native species, the woodlands contribute strongly to the *sense of naturalness*, for example as found in Glen Feshie. This is particularly strong where natural regeneration is also evident in combination with other dynamic landscape processes, such as river deposition, and where open woodland edges allow unrestricted access and appear to respond directly to physical conditions (rather than, for example, grazing or muirburn that indicate human intervention). Within these woodlands, there is a diverse mix of spatial and visual characteristics, including foci such as ‘granny pines’ that appear *arresting* at a local level. Generally, the woodland trees also provide shelter and amplify the *sense of sanctuary* and *solitude* (in some areas, partly by screening visually and audibly *human artefacts, contemporary land use* or human activity).



In contrast to native woodlands, forest plantations indicate human intervention and *contemporary use* (even if comprising native species) and diminish the sense of *naturalness* and *sanctuary*, particularly where these are fenced, of dense tree spacing, of single species or age composition, and/or evidence of ground modification. Furthermore, extensive forest plantations outside the WLA are seen from some of the hills within the area and appear particularly prominent as a *contemporary use*, especially where these indicate ongoing human intervention, activity or the use of machinery.

The draft Inshriach/Invereshie NNR management plan provides no evaluation of how the proposals within it will impact on this sense of naturalness.

The proposals

There are a lot of good things in the draft Management Plan [Invereshie and Inshriach NNR – management plan – 2017-2027 \(DRAFT\)](#) (although its clearly behind schedule). These include:

- A commitment to no further built development: *“The built infrastructure is limited to the promoted trails, the car park at Allt Ruadh and Drake’s Bothy”*.
- And a focus on limiting deer numbers (which impact on natural regeneration of the Caledonian

pine forest): *“One of the main activities on the reserve is the management of impacts from grazing herbivores. Invereshie & Inshriach does not sit in isolation but is part of a wider ecological area. We therefore work in partnership with our neighbours to restore, enhance and improve habitat and reduce impacts especially from herbivores. Our target is for fewer than 5 deer per hectare; we will revise this as required through the term of the plan.”*

The problem is that those managing the reserve do not appear to be content with letting nature take its course:

However the rate of regeneration in the Allt Ruadh (west of Geal Charn) catchment is still slow – we intend to continue with the programme of intervention through trial management to find the method which can produce an acceptable level of regeneration for this priority habitat. While we are encouraging the spread of woodland across the reserve we are aware that this is resulting in the loss of some of the protected dry heath habitats on the reserve. The case for converting dry heath to woodland has already been approved by Scottish Government in the Cairngorms SAC.

Note, the problem is NOT that there is NO natural regeneration, it's that Nature is too slow! Hence, the proposal is to plant trees and shrubs – gardening – in order to speed up natural processes. The fundamental problem with this is that as soon as you plant, the processes are no longer natural: instead of a wild and natural landscape, SNH wants to create its own version of an Alpine garden.

The justification given for this is:

Below the crags on the upper slopes there are areas of montane scrub. This is one of the rarest habitats in Scotland and it is important we enhance this habitat. Methods for establishing a scrub zone with willows and juniper have been trialled in other areas of Scotland, increasing resilience and establish new populations for the rarer species of upland plants through translocation, propagation and planting – we will review options before considering which to take forward here.

I believe this justification is wrong. There is no evidence given that any species on the reserve are currently threatened by extinction, the issue is simply that regeneration is slow. In any case the trial plantings elsewhere in Scotland mean the long-term future of the rare species is assured (and they could, if necessary, in future being transplanted back to the Cairngorms). There is no pressing need to do it now. So, why interfere in perhaps the one place in Scotland where a tree line has been able to develop naturally? That surely is what SNH should be valuing above all else? The fundamental issue is we need to protect nature in some areas from human interference but instead of recognising and promoting this SNH believes it (and humans) can do better:

NH1.5 Where appropriate encourage the spread of woodlands and improve species diversity through planting rarer native species including montane scrub.

NH1.6 Produce and implement plan to increase extent and enhancement of montane scrub communities.

NH1.7 Ensure that opportunities for translocations to the reserve of appropriate threatened species using The Scottish Code for Conservation Translocations are investigated and implemented.

The great conservationist Dick Balharry, who worked for SNH for years, after trialling different methods of human intervention to save nature (including planting at Beinn Eighe and fencing out deer) came to the conclusion we should, apart from culling deer, leave nature alone in certain places to take its own course. He put those ideas into practice at Creag Meagaidh and those ideas have been responsible for how the Invereshie part of the NNR has been managed in recent years. They are too important to be abandoned by a consultation which will be seen by very few people.

I suspect part of the reason for SNH's proposals to plant at Invereshie come from the example of its partners in Cairngorms Connect. The Forestry Commission, being made up of foresters rather than nature conservationists, always has a focus on planting trees rather than natural regeneration. Meantime, the RSPB, has also been impatient about the time nature takes to do what it does and has been planting undisturbed soils at Abernethy to further its vision of what the area SHOULD look like. And, outside of Glen Feshie, Wild Land Ltd has been planting tens of thousands of trees and, if SNH gets away with this, could extend its own plans to start planting in Glen Feshie. After all, if the Scottish Government's conservation agency is allowed to plant, why would it not follow their example?

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Regenerating Scots pine – a welcome sight – high in Glen Feshie (Allt Garbhlach to right). Photo taken April 2018

Within the context of Cairngorms Connect therefore its even more important that SNH makes a commitment NOT to plant the land it owns and makes the arguments for natural regeneration around

the most important areas of Caledonian Pine Forest in the National Park. Its also crucially important that the Cairngorms National Park Authority, which failed to give full recognition to the importance of natural processes in its draft Forest Strategy ([see here](#)), includes in the revised plan areas where there will be a strong presumption against any planting of trees and where natural processes will be allowed to run wild.

What needs to happen

The introduction to the draft plan states:

Nature comes first here, and wildlife continues to flourish largely undisturbed by human intervention.

Instead of changing that, SNH's proposed management plan for Inverseshie should re-affirm its current policy of no intervention except to cull deer and then commit to using this as an example for other areas in the Cairngorms, including its partners in Cairngorms Connect.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. forestry
5. Forestry Commission Scotland
6. scottish natural heritage
7. wild land

Date Created

May 3, 2018

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