

The Royal Family, land mis-management and the Cairngorms National Park

Description

Forests must be given urgent protection on Royal Deeside estates

THE relationship between the Royal Family and hunting is complex. As Mark Smith indicated, the Royal Family can reflect wider social change but as regards hunting, they appear to be in a quandary ("Royal Meghan could help end inglorious Scottish tradition", The Herald, December 17). No longer are tigers and elephants shot at dawn by members of our Royal Family. Instead, conservation is the top priority and commendable efforts are made in faraway places to protect habitat, curtail illegal poaching and raise public awareness. Closer to home, however, the Royal Family seems to be well behind the curve.

Between the River Dee and the summit slopes of Lochnagar, lies Ballochbuie Forest, one of the UK's finest remnants of the ancient Caledonian pinewood, a surviving fragment of the native woodlands which established after the last Ice Age, 9,000 years ago. But only a small portion of Ballochbuie is in a healthy condition, with young trees emerging from the heather to replace the ancient veterans that dominate the landscape. All these young trees are behind a high fence.

Elsewhere, the veterans are alone, old, gaunt Scots pine spread out across the open moorland, slowly succumbing to time and storm, with no young replacements. The problem is obvious – too many red deer, to the detriment of the natural habitat, both on Balmoral and neighbouring estates. A heavy cull of red deer numbers is urgently needed to reduce the red deer numbers that roam these hills.

In the headwaters of the River Dee lies Mar Lodge Estate, owned by the National Trust for Scotland. Here, the ancient pinewood is recovering its former glory, with young trees emerging from the heather as red deer grazing levels are reduced through culling. In its future strategy document, "for protecting Scotland's heritage, 2018-2023", MLE comes in for special mention: "We had a massive flood here in 2015, and it gave local people an understanding of how our hills are grazed so heavily that the water just runs off them. Having trees there could have helped a lot." Many of those local people who live downstream, in "Royal" Deeside, must wonder why the NTS is an exception in pursuing such a policy in contrast to other Deeside

landowners. Even worse, studies have compared the impact of storms that hit Scotland and then strike similar terrain and geology in Norway – the damage and associated insurance costs appear to be much less there than in Scotland. Tree and shrubs appear to be the answer. Over the last 100 years grazing pressure on hillsides in south-west Norway has reduced, with native woodland returning in response. Next time a Deeside citizen is facing the misery of yet more flooding, perhaps the answer is to think about Norway and send the bill for their property repair to Her Majesty.

**Dave Morris,
2 Bishop Terrace,
Kinnesswood, Kinross.**

HOW I welcome Mark Smith's article of December 17 supporting the Duchess of Sussex's opposition to killing animals and grouse shooting in particular ("Royal Meghan could help end inglorious Scottish tradition", The Herald, December 17). How grouse shooting could ever be classed as a sport I cannot understand. It is nothing less than mass murder.

Mr Smith also highlights the economic arguments in support of shooting that we have heard for years and the disastrous ecological consequences of grouse moor management. As a campaigner for more national parks in Scotland I too question Roseanna Cunningham's judgment and lack of support for key issues relating to the natural environment. For example, despite evidence from around the world relating to the economic benefits of national designations she continues to oppose more of them in Scotland whilst at the same time extolling the virtues of the two that we have. I frankly despair that the SNP cannot seem to recognise that investment in the environment is crucial to secure everyone's future and is a real priority that should not be ignored.

Let us all support Meghan's opposition to shooting and hope that this boosts the case for supporting the proper care of remarkable upland landscape environment.

**Ross Anderson,
The Studio, East Lochhead,
Kilbirnie Road, Lochwinnoch.**

On Xmas Eve excellent letters appeared in the Herald on the relationship between the Royal Family and hunting by Dave Morris, former Director Ramblers Scotland, and Ross Anderson, former Chair, Scottish Campaign for National Parks.

The Royal Family has, ever since Queen Victoria came to Deeside, played a central role in legitimising hunting culture, practice and consequent land-use across upland Scotland. As long as the way they manage their land at Balmoral and Delnadamph ([see here](#)) remains unchallenged, other landowners across Scotland will mimic what they do. That entails maintaining a huge Red Deer population and intensive grouse moor management at the expense of almost every other species, including humans.

Hunting interests understand the importance of the Royal Family. Historically, once Prince Albert turned against hunting deer with dogs, that practice rapidly disappeared. Andrew Salvesen, one of the main advocates of hunting interests in Scotland and a Director the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, has long had very close links with Princes Charles. He is a neighbour, leasing the shooting on the Dinnet Estate. In 2014 he acquired Auchnerran, on the eastern flanks of Morven and just a short drive from Balmoral, which is now run as a demonstration farm for the GWCT ([see here](#)). All that

brings influence. It allows him to promote a model of “conservation land management” which is focussed on game production. This is in direct opposition to the rewilding model that has developed under the aegis of Wild Land Ltd and Cairngorms Connect on the western side of the National Park.

The two very different approaches clash on the National Trust for Scotland’s Mar Lodge Estate. While it was Prince Charles who was originally rumoured to be behind the Easter Trust, which contributed £4.5m to its purchase, the money was later revealed to come from the Salvesen family. It came with a costly condition, the maintenance of traditional deer stalking. That was in direct opposition to the conditions previously laid down by Percy Unna when he donated Glen Coe, the Five Sisters and other mountain properties to the NTS. Unna’s Rules stipulated deer stalking should cease. The Easter Trust bequest has given sporting estates undue influence in the management of Mar Lodge ever since.

The main consequence has been not just that stalking has continued but so have traditional sporting estate management practices, including maintenance of high deer numbers and muirburn.



One kilometre west from Linn of Dee on Mar Lodge estate. Note extensive muirburn on slopes of Ca

left and isolated granny pines.

At the same time the public face of NTS has been focussed on trying to promote restoration of the native pinewoods. This has resulted in the estate being managed in two halves, one for sport and one for conservation. The contrast Glen Dee (above) and Glen Lui is striking:



Natural regeneration in Glen Lui between Linn of Dee and Derry Lodge

Combining these two very different management objectives has been a challenge. It was because of them that NTS decided to install a deer fence part way along Sgorr Mor, the Corbett that stands between it and Glen Dee.



Spot the difference between the land on the two sides of the deer fence which ends abruptly in the m nowhere.

The importance of the fence is not to prevent deer accessing Glen Lui and Glen Luibeg, as its easy to circumvent, but symbolic. It demarcates two very difference approaches to land management, on the one side conservation, on the other sporting.



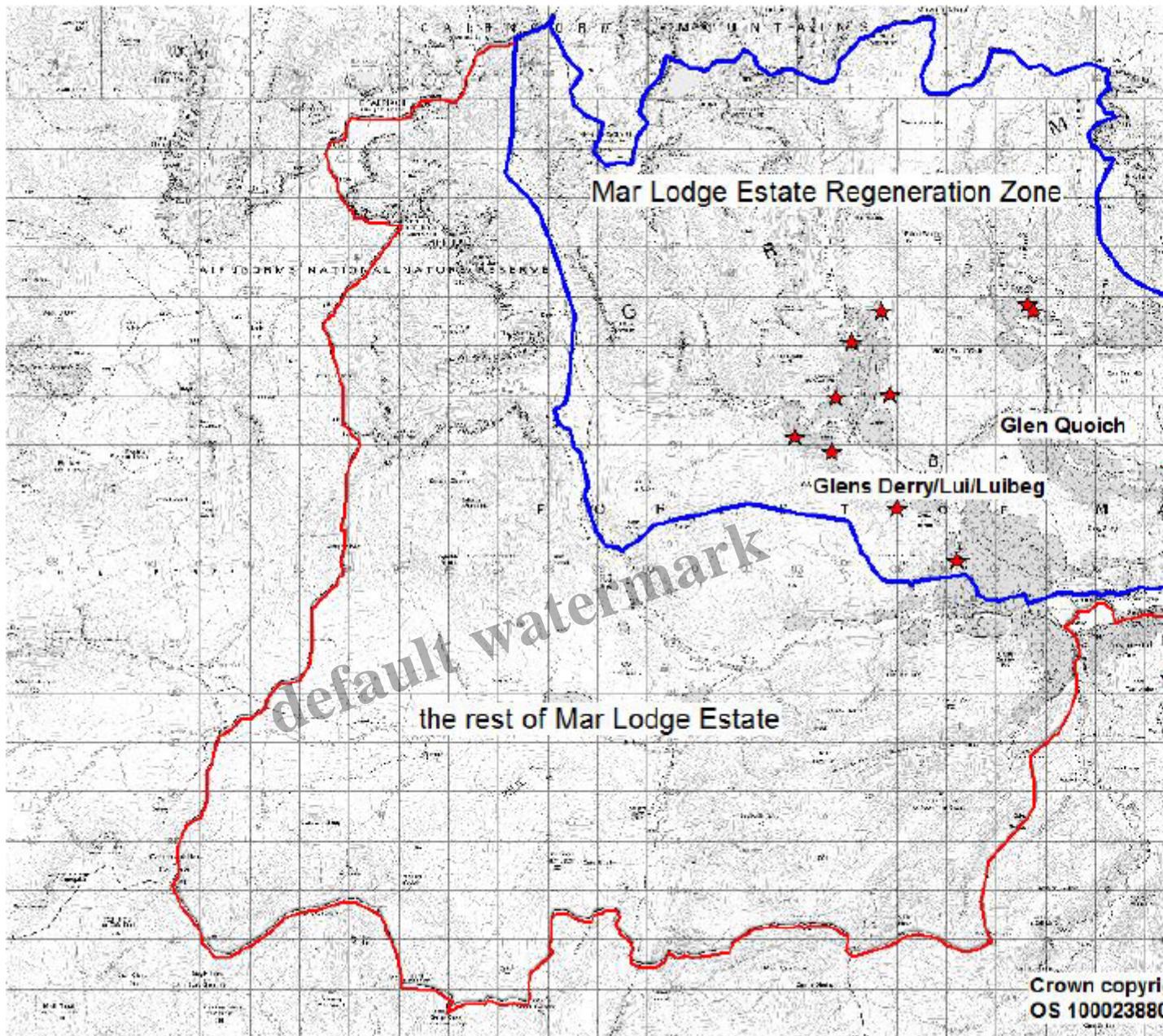
A beautiful area of old Caledonian Pine forest 3/4 km from Linn of Dee is being left to die because its on the wrong side of the fence

This is senseless. It did not, however, prevent SNH re-declaring the whole of the Mar Lodge Estate as a National Nature Reserve in 2017. Its not difficult to imagine the celebrations at the GWCT – if this can be an NNR, so could any sporting estate.

The efforts being made by NTS staff to keep deer numbers down to promote natural regeneration north of the fence are constantly undermined by the large deer numbers to the south. That allows sporting interests to claim natural regeneration does not work without fencing such as is used at Balmoral.

The explanation, however, for why natural regeneration at Mar Lodge is so much less extensive and is taking far longer than that taking place at Glen Feshie lies in their failure to cull as many deer. Part of this results from NTS' target deer densities on the north side of the fence still being almost twice those in Glen Feshie (3.5 deer per square km compared to 2 deer per square km). Part also though

stems from the large pool of deer to the south and west, “the rest of Mar Lodge Estate”.



Map from Shaila Rao research findings article, see below – Glen Feshie estate lies to the west of the

That pool of deer does not just cause problems for the Mar Lodge “Regeneration Zone”. The main stalking area is around the Geldie where the boundary of Mar Lodge Estates marches with that of Glen Feshie. The deer overflow from the Geldie and Dee into the Eidart and Feshie and constantly threaten to undermine the efforts of Wild Land Ltd to bring deer numbers down. This is creating pressures for Wild Land Ltd to improve vehicular access up the Feshie to control deer numbers more easily. The impact of a new track on one of the wildest areas in the Cairngorms would be immense and in my view unacceptable.

The answer is for NTS to reduce further the number of deer on the whole of the Mar Lodge Estate. Their own staff have produced some excellent research which shows the reduction in deer numbers to

date has led to natural regeneration ([see here](#)). The converse of this is that where deer numbers have not been reduced NTS is maintaining not just a “wet desert” but a reserve pool of deer which threaten all the areas around them. As the map shows this is a huge area and poses a serious obstacle to the Cairngorms National Park’s aspiration for landscape scale conservation in the Cairngorms. It also incidentally explains why NTS are not part of “Cairngorms Connect”, the partnership across the western flank of the main Cairngorms massif, whose focus is native woodland regeneration. Their management objectives are not compatible.

The CNPA could make no better resolution for the New Year than to tackle the sporting interests that are still driving the mismanagement of land on a large part of the Mar Lodge Estate and to bring deer numbers there down. Who would have anticipated that in Meghan Markle they might find an unlikely ally?

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. grouse moors
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Date Created

December 27, 2018

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