

Climate change, fires and why we need to rewild grouse moors – starting with our National Parks

Description

I almost never watch TV but last week, in the middle of the first week of the Extinction Rebellion protest, I did watch the BBC documentary “Climate Change – the Facts” narrated by David Attenborough. The footage of forest fires burning out of control and the evidence that not only have the numbers of fires increased but they are releasing even more carbon into the atmosphere was quite compelling. The hotter the climate, the greater the likelihood of fires. The converse of this was the argument by climate change scientists that one of the best and quickest ways to take carbon out of the atmosphere and reduce global warming is to restore the world’s forests. It got me thinking about how fire is being used to mismanage moorland in Scotland and more specifically in our National Parks.

Grouse moors and global warming

It’s hypocritical for anyone living in Scotland to be concerned about the felling of the world’s forests and how this is releasing CO₂ into the atmosphere unless we are prepared to take a good look at what is going on here and take action ourselves. It’s not just that our forests were cleared long ago, leaving us one of the most deforested countries in Western Europe. The Scottish Government’s targets for extending forest cover from just under 19% to 21% over 10 years is not fundamentally going to change that. It’s also about the role of moorland – which covers c44% of the Cairngorms National Park at present – in locking up carbon.

The potential of moorland to absorb carbon is two fold. Drier moorland provides large areas where forests could develop, while wetter moorland – where trees would not grow naturally – does the same through peat accumulation. Re-wilding could promote both these processes at very little cost. All we need to do is bring the numbers of grazing animals down and both peat and woodland would develop through natural processes, in the areas where they were most suited. That would help Scotland put our own house in order. The problem is that muirburn is preventing this from happening.

Indeed, as grouse moor management has intensified, so has muirburn. The problem is getting worse, rather than better. Heather has a natural life cycle of around 24 years and would regenerate naturally if allowed to do so. From the perspective of people who want to shoot lots of red grouse, however, much of that natural life cycle is wasted. Heather becomes increasingly woody and straggly as it grows older, not much good for the adult grouse which favour the younger, greener shoots (though they also eat the seeds). What’s more, if trees were allowed to develop in the drier parts of our moors, that would mean less heather and less food for red grouse. The consequence is muirburn which is used to promote as much young heather as possible.

Muirburn increases our contribution to global warming. It releases carbon from vegetation and soils and prevents us from doing our bit to restore natural ecosystems by taking carbon out of the world’s

atmosphere, whether through extending forest or peatland cover. Through its destruction of vegetation and peat it also enables water to drain from the land more quickly. This dries out the ground and makes it more prone to fires – part of the explanation for the high fire risk warnings at the weekend – which in turn releases more carbon into the atmosphere. A vicious circle, just like that the BBC documentary described for the world's forests, but one over which we in Scotland have control. This is arguably the biggest single conservation challenge facing the Cairngorms National Park, bigger even than overgrazing.

And, before anyone starts arguing muirburnt moorland is good for wildlife – how does that fit with the reports of all the wildlife killed by the fire at Marsden Moor in Yorkshire at the weekend ([see here](#))? – a new report from SNH released yesterday revealed 8 out of the 20 moth species in most rapid decline are associated with moorland “*indicating that the insects may be disproportionately struggling in this habitat*”. No-one should be surprised, as generally the older the plant or tree, the more species which are supported and muirburn destroys everything that is older.

At present the Scottish Government is doing nothing to tackle this, from either a global warming or species perspective. There is not one mention of muirburn in Scotland's Forest Strategy 2019-29, which was launched at the beginning of the year. The voluntary muirburn code has done almost nothing to prevent muirburn increasing ([see here](#)). There is, however, an opportunity with the Werrity Review ([see here](#)) which was set up in response to the persecution of golden eagles and other raptors and is due to report shortly. It was tasked with ensuring that “*grouse moor management practices are sustainable*”. It will be interesting to see what it says and recommends about muirburn. Anything less than a complete ban should be a disappointment for anyone who cares about the future of our planet.

Our National Parks, fires and muirburn

The same day as the BBC Climate Change programme, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority and the Cairngorms National Park Authority ([see here](#)) issued a new release warning the public about the high fire risk in the countryside over the holiday weekend. It got some media coverage. The advice in it was all thankfully based on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, sensible and to the point (unlike the advice previously issued about dogs ([see here](#))) but directed only at recreational users, not land managers.

Also thankfully, the news release avoided mentioning the LLTNPA camping byelaws. These created a new offence lighting a fire that is likely to cause damage within a camping management zone. That would just have confused matters as all three agencies would have had to explain the differences between the law inside and outside the camping management zones. I am not sure anyone could, as the existing law already allows people causing fires to be charged with a number of offences (fire raising, criminal damage, vandalism etc). A good example is the people charged with causing the Illkley Moor fire at the weekend ([see here](#)). We never needed new laws, just the enforcement of existing ones.

The news release got me me thinking again why both our National Parks rightly warn visitors to the countryside about the risk of fires BUT remain completely and utterly silent about the widespread use of fire by landowners on grouse moors in Scotland. It not just that these fires get out of control ([see here](#))

and destroy areas of high wildlife value, its that they make the impact of fires caused by other people worse. This includes those caused accidentally by recreational users – the target of the news release – those deliberately caused by vandals and, what is likely to become an increasing problem as windfarm infrastructure ages, those caused by electrical faults.

Within this context it was very worrying to read the following extract from the CNPA Chief Executive's report – generally a very helpful document – to their March Board Meeting:

- c) **East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership:** The partnership has recently been focused on collecting data on e.g. muirburn, mountain hares, waders, and planned woodland creation. Collectively significant progress is being made on all of these topics. On 27th March, CNPA Land Management Team will meet with gamekeepers from the six estates along with representatives from the Heather Trust and Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust to observe and discuss muirburn on site. This will be an important opportunity to engage with the keepers directly about management on the ground and to discuss different perspectives.

Instead of telling the estates in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership, the National Park's vehicle to improve the way grouse moors are managed, that muirburn needs to stop, the Park is sending out staff to learn from gamekeepers. You could not make it up! Instead of showing an example to the Werrity Review, which could then be replicated across the rest of Scotland, the CNPA appears to be in the pocket of landowners. But then the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership includes Balmoral and Prince Charles's estate at Delnadamph. Until the Royal Family changes how they manage their land and the Park Authority challenges them on this, the problem and destruction within the Cairngorms National Park will continue.

What needs to happen

While fires occur naturally in most natural ecosystems (one of the main causes is lightning strikes) as the world heats up they are becoming more prevalent. The hot weather in Scotland this Easter and the large number of fires reported in the media ([see here for example for Moray fire](#)) are not a coincidence but intricately linked. Within this context it is of course important that we do all we can to stop unnecessary fires, by which I mean those caused by humans whether accidentally or deliberately. Our National Parks have an important role to play here and they were right to issue their message to recreational users. That however is just tinkering at the edges. The much bigger issue which our National Parks should be tackling is muirburn, which is both destructive in its own right and increases the impact of other fires. It needs to stop.

The failure to stop muirburn provides a graphic example of Greta Thunberg's and ExtinctionRebellion's criticisms that our governments are doing nothing meaningful to address global warming. It is also something that our National Parks and the Scottish Government could easily address if they were prepared to challenge the way landowners manage their land and insisted this should be to the benefit of all.

If you have not seen it a petition has been submitted to the UK Parliament about how re-wilding could help to address global warming ([see here](#)). Of the 50,000 or so signatures to date – 100,000 secures a parliamentary debate – it is interesting to note that the highest levels of support come from rural areas, including the Highlands. I am pretty confident that if our National Parks were to decide to tackle muirburn, there would – notwithstanding the moans of the landowners and gamekeepers – be high levels of support for this from local residents. After all, its many of their houses which are now in the firing line.

Category

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