

Cairngorms Connect – planting in the wrong place?

Description



Recent planting of Rowan, Alder, Willow and Birch at Cairn Gorm between the Sheiling Rope Tow car park and the Funicular track. This planting was required to mitigate the damage caused by the construction of the Sheiling track. The soils at Cairn Gorm have been so damaged by successive engineering works that they are not suitable for native vegetation to grow in this place within the Caledonian forest area on the North West side of the Cairngorms where planting is a bad idea (see below). Photo Credit Alan Bratney August 2019.

In theory the Cairngorms Connect project appears to be a good thing. Four organisations are working together across 600 square kilometres of the western Cairngorms to deliver the rewilding of marsh, river, forest and mountain habitats. These organisations, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forest and Land Scotland and Wildland Limited own a great tract of land

stretching from Nethy Bridge in the north to south east of Kingussie. Central to their aims is the protection of the ancient Caledonian Forest which flanks the mountain core at the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. Equally important is the expansion of this forest uphill towards the altitudinal limit for tree and shrub growth and, where possible, to encourage its spread along the hillsides. Already this tract of forest is the finest near natural native forest left in the UK. With careful and sensitive management it will become one of the greatest rewilding projects in Europe.

Concern is growing, however, whether these organisations really are committed to protecting and expanding the forest in the best possible way, respecting the historical, ecological and wild land principles which should underpin such a project. Glossy brochures have been produced, a newsletter appears every month with inspiring messages about the restoration of nature in our most unspoilt mountain massif, the Cairngorms. Fine words and beautiful photographs ([see here](#)), but where is the detail? What is actually going to happen on the ground and who is in charge? A project officer has been appointed, with administrative support, but what are the governance arrangements, who is on the Board to oversee the work and what are the links to other organisations, both local and national, who also have a huge stake in the future of these mountains?

Take for example one of the partners in this project – Forestry and Land Scotland, the successor body to Forestry Enterprise Scotland, which became operational in April 2019. FES, Forestry Commission Scotland (the regulator and provider of grants) and their predecessors were notorious for the damage they did to many of the old Caledonian remnants. FES, the delivery arm, subjected many of them to intensive planting, often with exotic species. Elsewhere Forestry Commission Scotland, now called Scottish Forestry, used its grant aid powers to persuade private owners to adopt similar planting methods, albeit using Scots pine of local genetic provenance, around the remnants. Too much of this grant aid was predicated on fencing and planting, producing a financial support system which still operates today and is generally regarded by most experts on Caledonian Pinewood conservation as not fit for purpose.

One might hope that, as FCS/FES evolves into Scottish Forestry/Forest and Land Scotland, the leopard would change its spots. But early signs are ominous – the FLS website, in a plea for volunteers to help in its work, suggested until last week that assistance is required to “*replant the Caledonian Forest*” and still contain links to how to do so! How on earth a Scottish Government agency with forestry as its core remit in this day and age believes that our ancient remnants require “replanting” is beyond belief. For over 50 years numerous scientific studies and practical work in the forests have shown that their survival is simply dependent on the control of grazing animals, combined with enough patience on the part of forest managers to allow the

restorative power of nature to play its part and replenish the forests through natural regeneration.

The foundations for the conservation of Caledonian Pinewood were laid in the 1950's by the Aberdeen University forestry department, led by Professor Henry Marshall Steven and his research student Jock Carlisle. They emphasised that the fundamental criteria that distinguished these ancient remnants from other woodland was that they were naturally regenerated, from generation to generation, all the way back to the last Ice Age, over 7,000 years ago. Steven and Carlisle went on to map each remnant, carefully distinguishing between areas of old forest, naturally regenerated and areas subject to planting in recent times. Where Scots pine was planted this was regarded as native pinewood, not Caledonian Pinewood, with its historical and ecological heritage links to the last Ice Age through natural regeneration.

In the Cairngorms, at the same time as Steven and Carlisle were studying the ancient pinewoods across the Highlands, the foundations for nature conservation protection were being laid following passage of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The first agreements were made with landowners to establish the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve with the primary aim of *"allowing for the natural development of the reserve's plant and animal communities with a minimum of interference from man's activities"*. Over succeeding decades this principle underpinned conservation work in the Cairngorms massif and had, at its central focus, the aim of reducing the size of red deer populations so that grazing levels no longer inhibited the natural regeneration of the forest.

Today there must be considerable doubt as to whether FLS, with their desire to "replant" the Caledonian Forest, are going to adhere to the long held principles established for the Cairngorms massif. This is of concern, for example, in the Rothiemurchus section of the Cairngorms Connect area where FCS purchased a large section of the Caledonian Pinewood a few years ago from Rothiemurchus estate. This purchase, using over £7 million of public money was carried out in complete secrecy without even SNH being consulted, even though they had statutory responsibility for conservation measures in this pinewood. Why the secrecy, what have FCS/FES and their successors, got to hide, and what are their intentions?

On the brighter side, however, is the possibility that FLS might take a greater interest in the land above their current ownership in Glenmore. Coire Cas is an area where the opportunities for planting a native Scots pinewood, up to the altitudinal limits, are considerable. A start was made in the 1970s but fizzled out under the ownership of Highlands and Islands Development Board and their successors, Highlands and Islands Enterprise. A few years ago FCS tried to regain ownership of the upper

slopes of Cairn Gorm, re-establishing an ownership pattern which had been in place from the 1920s until 1971 when the HIBD grabbed the land for their own use and initiated the most incompetent management of any state owned land ever seen in Scotland. This persists today in the ownership of HIE. But establishing a high altitude native pinewood in Coire Cas will be good for skiing, providing increased snow holding, good for summer tourism with opportunities to walk through montane scrub and tree line vegetation, just like Norway, good for providing a seed source for the wilder parts of the Cairngorms and good for downstream protection in Glenmore from flooding.

But the HIE land is not part of the Cairngorms Connect project. It should be. Coire Cas is the most modified tract of land in the Cairngorms, subject to intensive management and use. It is an ideal focus for planting efforts in the Cairngorms massif and the only part of the massif where such action is appropriate and required. Remnants of the ancient Caledonian Pinewood are present in all other watersheds of the massif and provide the basis for expansion by natural regeneration alone.

Another area which is missing from the Cairngorms Connect project is Atholl estate which occupies much of the southern sector of the national park. All the watersheds on this estate lack remnants of the Caledonian Pinewood, with much of the moor and mountain land subject to excessive levels of grazing by red deer. These watersheds would be ideal for the establishment of native pinewood stretching through the full altitudinal zonation from high forest in the lower glens to higher altitude tree line and montane scrub communities. Tree and shrub planting is needed here over extensive areas, alongside major reductions in deer populations. All these watersheds drain into the River Tay so such planting would help to reduce downstream flooding in communities along the river, as well as providing a seed source of native pinewood plants for surrounding areas, including the Cairngorms massif to the north. The increasing wildness of these moorland and mountain landscapes as native woodland gradually established in a mosaic across the low and mid altitude ranges would enhance biological, outdoor recreation and sporting values. Incorporating Atholl estate into Cairngorms Connect would be a first step in realising this vision and providing a location where all the planting energies of FLS staff could be safely directed!

Cairngorms Connect has the potential to bring enormous benefit to a large part of the Cairngorms National Park as a rewilding project of European significance. But progress is dependent on establishing a more open dialogue with all other interests that attach equal importance to the future protection and evolution of this area. Agreement on future strategy and operational plans is an essential first step.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. conservation
4. Forestry Commission Scotland
5. re-wilding
6. restoration
7. scottish natural heritage
8. wild land

Date Created

September 15, 2019

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