While Australiaâ??s National Parks burn, Scotlandâ??s flood

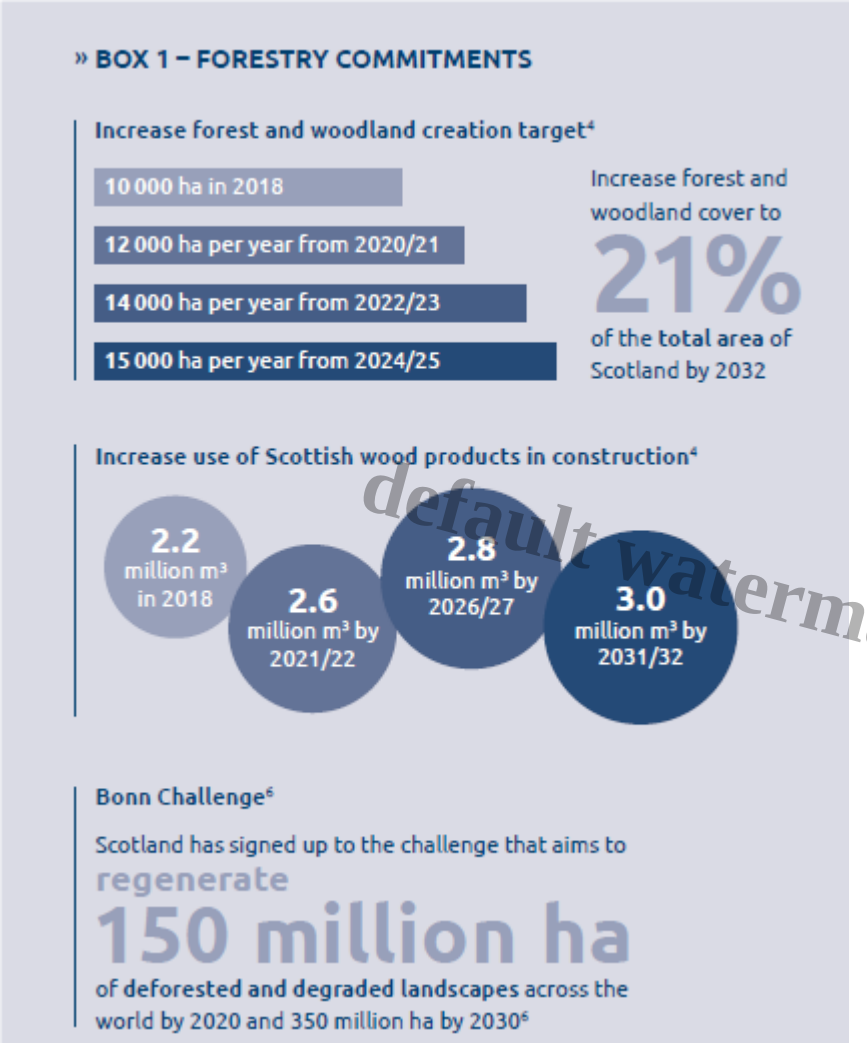
Description

The River Gynack at the railway bridge by Kingussie High School, at 3pm 11 Jan. Note the broken trunks on the left which, when river levels are as high as this, can act like battering rams. Poto Credi David Lintern

I was sent this photo from David Lintern, the fine outdoor writer and photographer (see here), last night and it prompted further thoughts about the Climate Emergency and the connections between what happening on opposite sides of the world in Scotland and Australia (see here for most recent post on lessons from the Australian crisis).

Over 500,000 hectares of the Wollemi National Park have burned since October (see here for NSW fires details) and over 10 million hectares in Australia as a whole. (The BBC has assembled some

good facts) Thatâ??s a lot of forest. It rather puts into perspective Scotlandâ??s woodland expansion targets which are continually being promoted as ambitious and a major contribution towards tackling carbon emissions:



Even with the more ambitious targets which start from 2020 it would take us thirty years to regenerate an area the size of the the Cairngorms National Park (450,000 ha). And young forest wonâ??t contain nearly as much wood and carbon as what has been burned in Australia.

Scotland of course is tiny compared to Australia, but the figures illustrate that in working towards carbon neutral emissions, we should treat planting trees in Scotland as re-absorbing carbon that has been released by the historic destruction of woodland â?? our denuded â??deer forestsâ?• and grouse moors â?? rather than as compensation for the fossil fuels which we continue to extract at pace from the North Sea. Its the extraction of carbon from beneath the earthâ??s surface which is the fundamental problem and which needs to be addressed worldwide.

The Scottish Government is not even fiddling on this while Australia burns and we are deluged. Last month saw the highest December temperature ever recorded in Scotland, 18.3 degrees. What used to fall as snow, which was then released gradually in our rivers, now pours off the hill thanks to Australian coal, north sea oil and the rest.

Yesterday afternoon the latest downpours closed the railway between Kingussie and Inverness (see here). While its still to be revealed what role the very high levels of the River Gynack played in this, that a stretch of railway in the Cairngorms National Park has been affected, like the unprecedented destruction caused by torrential rail to the West Highland Land in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park in August (see here), is not just an accident of fate.

The poorly designed Gynack flood diversion channel (see here) which was granted planning permission by the Cairngorms National Park Authority, partially funded by Highland Council and intended to alleviate the flood risk to the village of Kingussie is still not operational (as another Kingussie resident confirmed to me yesterday evening). Part of its justification was to protect the railway. Reason enough for the CNPA Board to conduct its own minâ??public inquiry into whatâ??s gone wrong.

At the same time the land mis-management practices which continue to blight much of the National Park will have also played a role:

Natural regeneration around the Gynack above the intake to the flood diversion channel is continuall heather stalks in foreground and line of rush beyond mark the ground that has been â??restoredâ?• intakes. Photo 2017.

Scrub vegetation and trees could play a significant role in slowing down the rate water enters the River Gynack but unfortunately the regenerating juniper is, like much other land managed as grouse moor, now subject to muirburn.

A little higher up the Gynack the extent of muirburn in the catchment and the way it prevents natural more obvious â?? another piece of appalling track construction in the foreground

Road above Gynack upper hydro intake 2017 leading to upper slopes of Carn na Fhreiceadain.

The roads that have been constructed by the Pitmain Estate in the catchment of the River Gynack as â??permitted developmentsâ?• also serve to channel water more quickily off the hill causing water levels in the river below to rise more than they otherwise would.

The failure to restore any vegetation in the drain on the left and the lack of any vegetated strip down track adds, completely unnecessarily, to the amount of water roads like this channel off the hill

So how much of the railway chaos reported by the Strathy yesterday has been created by muirburn and these roads?

What needs to happen before the Scottish Government and our public authorities treat the declaration of a â??climate emergencyâ?• as a real emergency and start to take action?

The answer, I suspect, is that no natural disaster, however large â?? think of Scott Morrison the Australian Prime Minister denying any link between increased temperatures and increased fires â?? will on its own persuade government at whatever level of the need to take the type of comprehensive action needed to address the climate emergency. There will of course be some token actions â?? expect lots more publicity about tree planting across Scotland designed to make people feel good (about which more anon) â?? but until people demand action from government at all levels in a way that cannot be

ignored, human created â??naturalâ?• disasters will only increase.

I am optimistic that that could happen in Scotland in 2020 with the world climate change conference which coming to Glasgow in November providing plenty of additional opportunities for people to put pressure on our public authorities and the Scottish Government to act.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. climate change
2. CNPA
3. flooding
4. landed estates
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