

The destruction of native woodland under our National Parks' planning systems

Description

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YOUR VIEWS

Ancient woods must be spared from axe

THIS November, the UN Climate Change Conference will be held in Glasgow.

It follows a major report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2018 that warned of "long-lasting or irreversible changes, such as the loss of some ecosystems" and that the goal of "limiting global warming to 1.5C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society".

Similarly, The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services has issued further dire warnings concerning the loss of global biodiversity.

Its report delves into the causes of nature collapse, "chief among which is the conversion of forests, wetlands and other wild landscapes into ploughed fields, dam reservoirs and concrete cities".

These reports make clear that a continuation of "business as usual" will lead to a catastrophic future for humanity and nature.

So, the spotlight will be on Scotland in November, at what Sir David Attenborough has called "this moment of crisis" as the nations of the world gather to try to find a sustainable way forward.

Perhaps the greatest scrutiny as far as land use and planning are concerned, will fall upon Scotland's national parks, which should surely be at the forefront

of change for the better. What will they see?

Well, they might see reports of the some 200 people, including many children, who marched through Aviemore in September as part of the school climate strikes, in support of real change.

But they may also be informed about this Friday's planning meeting of the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

The committee will consider an application to build seven houses in what Highland Council's forestry officer, in objecting to the proposal, describes as "ancient woodland" on the outskirts of Nethy Bridge. The facts surrounding this proposal are:

- The proposed site is not allocated for development in either the present or draft Local Development Plans.
- It was not allocated in the draft LDP because it would "lead to the loss of a significant area of high quality woodland habitat and change the character of that part of the village."
- The CNPA ecology report states: "The proposal involves the conversion of high quality native woodland into a housing development, there is a strong presumption against the removal of native woodland with high biodiversity value."
- The CNPA landscape recommend refusal "on the grounds of being contrary to the objectives and priorities set out to protect the approach and setting of Nethy Bridge."

Highland Council's landscape officer objects to the application.



THREATENED SITE: Lettoch Wood. The pasture on the right of the road has already controversially been allocated in the local plan too.

The Scottish Government's policy on control of woodland removal states that woodland removal should be allowed only where it would achieve "significant and clearly defined additional public benefits".

The "public benefits" outlined in the planning report into the proposal are:

- Five affordable out of the seven houses proposed. But this site is across the road from a proposed allocation of 20 houses in the new LDP, that could easily accommodate such a provision.
- An undertaking by the landowner to remove non-native species from the remainder of his woodland.

However, I have several decades' experience of successfully removing non-native species from woodlands, including much larger

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non-natives in the nearby Culstank Moss.

If this application is refused I would undertake, with the landowner's permission, to form a community group to remove (or ring-bark) all non-natives (including future seedlings) from his woodland, at no expense to himself.

The planner's report into this proposal attempts to argue that granting permission would benefit the first aim of the park due to its impact on the remaining woodland outwith the development site.

But that argument ignores the wider picture: owners of woodlands throughout the national park whose main interest is building houses in their woodlands would rub their hands in glee were this proposal to be granted.

Letter to Badenoch and Strathspey Herald 24/01/20

[Postscript – Good News! An hour or so after this was published the CNPA Planning Committee rejected this Planning Application by two votes! Well done them and what a contrast to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority where Board Members rubber stamp whatever is recommended by officers. What the CNPA now needs to tackle are the underlying issues pertaining to land ownership which are highlighted in the post].

The fine letter from Roy Turnbull (above) about the recommendation from Planning Staff to the Cairngorms National Park Authority Planning Committee today ([see here item 5 Lettoch](#)) that they

agree to destroy yet another piece of valuable woodland for housing is well worth reading. While the piece of land is NOT on the ancient woodland inventory, it seems that it should have been:

“The Highland Council Forestry Officer objects to the scheme. The Officer notes that the woodland is listed in the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland as ‘pole stage immature native pinewood of very high nativeness and semi-naturalness’. Although the woodland is not included in the Ancient Woodland Inventory, the Officer considers that the site should be regarded as Ancient woodland 2(a): “semi-natural woodland from maps of 1860 and continuously wooded to the present day”.

(Extract from Committee report)

The importance of ancient woodland

Woodland such as this has a particularly important role in reducing further global warming and for providing a home for wildlife (biodiversity in the jargon). Planting trees by itself can never compensate for the carbon released in the atmosphere by the continued burning of fossil fuel, partly because per cubic metre trees contain far far less carbon than coal, but also because when trees die most of the carbon they contain is released back into the atmosphere. Trees are thus a temporary solution for locking up carbon compared to coal and oil which were, until capitalism developed, safely buried beneath the earth's surface.

While the amount of carbon “locked up” in wood does increase over time as trees grow in size, much more importantly the fungi, bugs and beasts which feed on the trees convert a proportion of carbon contained in them to carbon contained in the soils. (If you want to understand more about this I highly recommend Richard Fortey's book “The Wood for the Trees” which is ostensibly about an ancient beech wood in the Chilterns but which has implications for woodland management across the British Isles). These woodland soils are far more important in the medium term for storing carbon than the wood itself, though both of course are interdependent. And the older the woodland and its soils, the more the biodiversity – a virtuous circle. As proof of this in this case the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group has provided some excellent evidence about the range of species on the Lettoch Road site in their response to the planning application ([see here](#)))

What's shocking, given this importance of ancient woodland for life as we know it, is that it is under threat as never before. Here is some recent evidence which gained some media coverage:

“Figures released today by the Woodland Trust show it is aware of 1,064 ancient woodlands at risk of damage or destruction [across the UK] – the highest number since it started compiling the data in 1999. But this may just be the tip of the iceberg as there may well be others it has not been notified of.

Of these cases 801 are live planning applications while the remaining 263 are included in various council site allocation plans – areas outlined for future development such as housing, business use or leisure facilities.”

Because the woodland affected by this particular planning application is NOT on the Ancient Woodland Inventory, it's one of the woods below “the tip of the iceberg”. There are lots of other examples, however, from the last couple of years of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority granting

permission to developers to destroy ancient woodland sites including Balmaha ([see here](#)) and Flamingo Land and Cameron House ([see here](#)).

If, as Roy Turnbull points out, our National Parks won't protect ancient woodland, who will?

So what is going wrong?

Ostensibly both our National Park Authorities acknowledge the importance of woodland for tackling climate change and biodiversity. There was a lot of guff about this in the LLTNPA's Trees and Woodland Strategy launched by the Minister Mairi Gougeon last week ([see here](#)), and, yesterday, Grant Moir, CEO of the CNPA was even quoted in the Herald as claiming this about climate change:

"There is much good work already being done in the park from woodland expansion and peatland restoration to new infrastructure for active travel.....but this needs to be scaled up to tackle the climate emergency".

So, why has Grant Moir, whom I believe is genuine in wanting to tackle climate change, allowed his officers to recommend a Planning Application that does the opposite?

The answer, in this and some other cases, is partly a matter of land ownership and who holds the power.

Rationally, one might think, there should be NO justification for developing the Lettoch Site for 7 houses, 5 of which will be affordable, when just over the road there is a much more suitable area which has been allocated for 20 new houses in the new Local Development Plan. However, the CNPA Committee report argues that because *"there is no certainty over its development"* this Planning Application, on woodland which was not included in the Local Development Plan and is outside the settlement boundary identified in that plan, can nevertheless be justified in housing terms.

If this is right, it seems to me there is no point in any Planning Authority having a Local Development Plan, as any development anywhere can be justified on the grounds that a developer somewhere else is sitting on land and not developing it. We might as well stop pretending and abolish the entire planning system.

The alternative is that, in order to make Development Plans work, sites which are allocated for development and NOT developed by a particular date should be compulsorily purchased. In this case the Highland's Small Communities Housing Trust could then get on in building the affordable houses that are needed in the Nethy Bridge area on land suitable for the purpose. That, however, would require the CNPA to be willing to use its compulsory purchase powers and, more to the point, for the Scottish Government to agree to this and help fund it.

The second argument used by Park Planners to justify the destruction of this woodland is that unless the CNPA approves this development the landowner might allow the rest of the wood to go to pot:

“The applicant has indicated they would be willing to manage the wider woodland area of 13.7 Ha that they own to improve its ecological value over the longer term. This would involve the removal of non-native species throughout the woodland to allow native woodland regeneration and longer term woodland management to prevent the regrowth of those invasive non-native species. Without such management, the ecological value of both the wider woodland and the development site will decline in the longer term.”

By approving the application, the CNPA planners argue they can guarantee through planning conditions that the rest of the wood won't be allowed to deteriorate. This seems to me totally the wrong way to look at the issue and again demonstrates the power of the landowners who, it appears, are effectively holding the National Park to ransom. The parallels with landowners and developers in our cities who allow fine listed buildings to fall apart in order to get new developments approved is obvious. Both urban and woodland blight should be unacceptable. Again, however, in this case there is a solution. The CNPA could use its conservation byelaw to create regulations requiring landowners to manage woodland in a certain way – it just needs a bit of will and imagination.

What this Planning Application demonstrates is that one of the main reasons why our planners keep recommending approval of developments that destroy ancient woodland is that they – and the Scottish Government – are not prepared to tackle the power of landowners and the free market. The approval of the housing application by the LLTNPA at Balmaha on a piece of ancient woodland, link above, when there were various suitable sites for housing in the vicinity, is another clear example of this. With the Declaration of the Climate Emergency, we need to put the welfare of the population as a whole and other species before the financial interests of landowners and developers.

Category

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