

## Prince Charles and conservation in the Cairngorms National Park

### Description



Corgarff Castle, is the most famous feature on Delnadamph and managed by Historic Environment Scotland. The castle is situated on a hillside, with the ski road to the Lecht behind and regenerating juniper in the foreground.

In October I went for a walk over Brown Cow Hill on the Delnadamph Estate, which was bought by the Queen in 1978 and gifted to Prince Charles on his marriage to Diana. I had not been for many years.

but was keen to see how the estate was being managed given Prince Charles' role and his statements about conservation. For example :

*"I am proud to be president of WWF. I have long admired its efforts to tackle the many threats to the world's wildlife, rivers, forests and seas. And I have come to see how effectively it uses its expertise and international reach to challenge the causes of degradation, such as climate change and the unsustainable use of natural resources. It is important work – after all, our natural world is the most precious asset we have."*

HRH The Prince of Wales, WWF-UK President ([see here](#))



Delnadamph Estate, with labelling added. Credit Cairngorms National Park Authority  
<https://cairngorms.co.uk/working-together/land-management/estates-map/>

Delnadamph is not a big estate, about 6,700 acres on the northern flank of Brown Cow Hill. It is curiously shaped and about as far from the sea as you can get in Scotland, being located near the source of the River Don. It was purchased apparently because there was not enough land for grouse shooting at Balmoral (8 miles to the south) and I was interested to see what impact this was having on



the natural environment, the forests, wildlife and rivers Prince Charles claims to care about.

## **Forest and muirburn**

There was not much sign of woodland on the estate, let alone forest.



The two old pines we saw walking up the Cock Burn appeared on their last legs and the plantation behind had been reduced in size to little more than an isolated stand of trees. That was the only woodland we saw on the estate until back down near Inchmore, where my OS Map, revised in 2010, shows another plantation.



View from ridge on north side of Corrie of Cairnculchavie down to Inchmore. The native woodland just left of centre behind the post is on the far side of River Don which forms the boundary between Delnadamph and the Allargue estate

The plantation at Inchmore used to extend to the green strip, top right, but it is now, as you can see from the muirburn, managed as grouse moor.





Policy woodland, with native planting and Allargue Estate beyond

Apart from some policy woodlands around the buildings at Delnadamph (left), the only area we saw that was managed as woodland was a narrow strip between the road and River Don where native trees had been planted. Delnadamph must be one of the least forested estates in the Cairngorms National Park. It is managed as part of the Balmoral Estate and is also part of the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership (ECMP), the Cairngorms National Park Authority's preferred vehicle for improving conservation on grouse moors.

According to the final report of the Cairngorm Nature Action Plan 2013-18 one of the aspirations of the ECMP was:

*“woodland expansion – using opportunity mapping, seeking to increase the woodland cover over the six estates from the current average of 14%”*

From looking at maps, I doubt Delnadamph reaches 5%. Apart from the small enclosure there was no evidence of anything being done to change that.



Near Inchmore – note how muirburn on right destroys juniper regeneration

The potential, however, is huge. The soils on the Don are generally better than on the Dee and juniper, one of Scotland's three native conifers, colonises the ground easily. Unfortunately it is being burned before it can provide cover for songbirds or even other “game” birds like black grouse or woodcock.





Muirburn on the northern projectory of Delnadamph with the watershed between the Avon and the Don to the left

It seems that Delndamph is only interested in red grouse. The CNPA has an aspiration to join up woodland across the main watersheds of the Cairngorms. There is not at chance of that happening while the land is burned like this.





After c12 km of tramping the high ground we even spotted a lone pine seedling at over 700m on the ridge between Little Geal Charn and Cairnculchavie, near the Well of Don, the source of that river and miles from any seed source. But what chance has it got when all the middle ground is burned?

What's happening is best viewed on google earth ([see here](#)):





Snapshot credit Google Earth. North-east corner of Delnadamph, Corgarff Castle bottom left.

In much of the Cairngorms it is high deer numbers that prevent woodland regeneration, but not at Delnadamph. Lengthy deer fences split the Upper Deeside and Donside Deer Management Group ([see here](#)) into a western half, where in 2016 deer density was 8.51 per square kilometre, compared to 0.36 deer per square kilometre on the eastern half.



Junction of the traditional deer fence separating Invercauld and Delnadamph with the electric fence, erected by the Glen Avon estate beyond.

While it varies slightly from year to year, Delnadamph now has few or no deer:

## Deer Distribution and Movements

- Over the last few years, the ere changed deer densities and mo
- There are no resident red deer l
- Main deer movements are with Homebeat of Invercauld in 2012

Delnadamph certainly has fewer deer than Glen Feshie which now has approximately two deer per square kilometre and where natural regeneration of the woodland is fantastic. There are some sheep, probably being used to mop up ticks that infect the grouse, but these would be easy enough to



remove:



Grazing on former plantation now intensively managed as grouse moor

In conservation terms, all sorts of exciting things could be happening if it was not for the muirburn. And, unlike neighbouring areas, none of the moor has been fossilised by EC designations, so it could be left to regenerate naturally. All it would take is a word from Prince Charles.

## Wildlife

Apart from sheep, the main animals we saw were red grouse. I hesitate to call them wild and not just because of intense management of heather designed to provide them with food. All over the hill there were "stations" with grit.



Grit station on Cairn Sawvie, near south west corner of the estate, Culardoch behind

I assumed the grit was medicated, as per the normal practice, but perhaps Prince Charles's red grouse at Delnadamph are organic, like his farm in Devon which he gave up earlier this year ([see here](#))? If so, he should be calling for his neighbours to do the same. Unregulated medication of animals should have no place in a National Park.

I failed to see a single mountain hare, although two of our party who were ahead at one point saw three.





For a couple of hours there was an ATV on the hill, which I assumed was mainly being used to replenish grit stations as it kept starting and stopping, although we also heard three shots. It is hard to imagine what the keeper was shooting unless mountain hare. Given public concern on the subject, perhaps Prince Charles or the Cairngorms National Park Authority could clarify whether mountain hare are shot at Delnadamph or not? There was certainly very little food for eagles to eat apart from red grouse, although high levels of raptor persecution on Donside ([see here](#)) is probably the reason we failed to see any. .

I kept an eye out for traps all day and was about to remark how pleasantly surprised I was not to have seen any when I spotted this one hidden by the road:





We had probably not been looking carefully enough or wandered in the places where traps are placed. But maybe I am doing HRH and President of the WWF a dis-service and he will declare I stumbled across the one and only trap at Invercauld?

## **Rivers**

I am afraid I did not have time to take a closer look at the Don, which forms the northern boundary of the estate. What I can say with confidence, however, is that all the muirburn on the estate helps water run off the hill and will contribute to flooding lower down the Don. While parkswatch has been critical of the postage stamp sized planting along rivers on Deeside – it's not nearly enough – there are even fewer trees on the Delnadamph side of the upper stretches of the Don.

## **Other conservation issues – peat bog and tracks**

While Brown Cow Hill is sometimes said to be a boring from a hillwalking perspective, the views over to Ben Avon are fantastic and there is some fine bog. From the 1960s various attempts, often paid for by



public money, were made to drain bogs to “improve” the land:

default watermark





Moorland grip or drainage channel – this one appeared to be infilling naturally

The Scottish Government is now investing significant sums of money to restore damaged areas of bog to lock up carbon and this includes blocking up grips. While it sticks in the craw to pay landowners to undo the damage they have done it can never compensate for all the oil that is still being extracted in the North Sea, peat bog restoration is a reasonable idea in principle. The Peatland Action Project, which now has a staggering £250m to invest over the next ten years ([see here](#)), needs to be careful not to “repair” damage which nature is in the process of fixing anyway. Nor is there any point in Peatland Action paying to restore particular areas of damaged bog unless the landowner concerned stops damaging land-management activities elsewhere on their estate.

In the Cairngorms a significant proportion of the Peatland Action monies is being directed at the seven estates in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership, including Delnadamph.

*“By the end of 2018, peatland restoration work had been carried out on nearly 700 ha of degraded peatland on ECMP estates, which corresponds to an estimated saving of 8,667 tonnes of CO2 per year. During 2019, five projects, on four estates (Mar, Invercauld, Mar Lodge & Balmoral), covering 267 ha were awarded funding from Peatland Action but a lack of contractor capacity meant that only two projects started and winter weather has prevented the completion of both of these. All five projects are being carried forward and new projects will be developed with Glenavon, Balmoral (**Delnadamph**) and Glenlivet estates”.*

On Brown Cow Hill, besides the drainage ditches, some of which appear to be blocking up naturally, there are several areas of eroding peat which could also have been identified by Peatland Action for restoration work:



There is a thorny question here, which in my view needs to be addressed publicly, about the extent to which exposed peat hags such as this are the result of “damage” or natural processes.

What was clear from our walk, however, was that management activities currently being carried out on the estate are damaging areas of bog.





There are All Terrain Vehicles churning up vegetation and peat. This appears to be a particular problem on lines linking grouse butts, so appears being caused by grouse shooters who are either not able or not prepared to walk up the hill to the butts.





A line of grouse butts we followed had been constructed fairly recently by removing vegetation from the bog, leaving exposed areas of peat which then release carbon into the atmosphere.





Medicated grit stations all over the hill had been created by cutting out blocks of turf leaving peat exposed to degradation and erosion.





And, to add to the damage, the hill road up Carn Oighreag appears to have been upgraded in the fairly recent past. From the CNPA planning portal no planning application appears to have been submitted for this work or a new extension to the road on the col between Carn Oighreag and Brown Cow Hill. According to the case studies within the Final Report on the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan 2013-18 ([see here](#)) the estates involved in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership had agreed “to map current hill tracks and ensure early discussions on any future proposals”.





All in one. In foreground area of exposed peat has been created, partially at least to build grouse but behind. There are now clear signs of erosion, made worse by ATVs being driven over it. More ATV tracks and a series of drainage ditches in parallel visible behind, with top left the recently upgraded road

While it is unclear if Prince Charles is aware of what is being done in his name – one would have hoped he would have noticed while out grouse shooting – it appears at present that the estate cannot be relied on to honour its commitments. In my view, Peatland Action should be requiring the estate to repair all the damage it has done to bogs in the last twenty years before agreeing to pay out a penny of public money.

## **What needs to happen**

Strangely, Delnadamph has so far remained out of the public eye. But the evidence from my visit shows that it is being managed in a way that is incompatible with the conservation objectives of the National Park. It is time that was addressed and one would hope that Prince Charles, given his oft stated commitment to conservation, would be prepared to do this. Perhaps as a first step he should invite Sir David Attenborough, with whom the Royal Family have been associating a lot recently, to visit

the estate and advise on what needs to be done?

In my view that should include an immediate end to all muirburn and other practices associated with intensive grouse moor management, such as use of medicated grit, trapping and shooting of mountain hares. Given that deer are effectively fenced out of the estate, Prince Charles could then afford to leave the land for ten years – apart possibly from some walked up shooting -and see what happens naturally. The two keepers currently employed by the estate could be re-engaged as nature guides – tours around “Prince Charles’s great conservation project in the Cairngorms” would be very popular – and to work on restoring damage caused by estate management activities.

After ten years, the situation could be reviewed and consideration given to taking down the fencing and letting deer back onto the estate. Deer, after all, should be an integral part of the natural environment and not artificially excluded as happens over much of Donside.

I would hope that Prince Charles would be prepared to take radical action and change his shooting lifestyle for the sake of the natural environment. If not, however, there is a strong case for management of the estate to be handed over to the Cairngorms National Park Authority. When the Queen bought Delnadamph for a reputed £750k back in 1978, she was effectively able to do so because of the large public subsidies provided to the Royal Family. Their continued private wealth is a result of ongoing public financial support and I believe the public therefore should have a right to expect that Royal land is managed in a way that helps to address the global environmental and climate crisis, not make it worse. The Crown should have a statutory duty to promote nature conservation just like the National Park.

## Category

1. Cairngorms

## Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. grouse moors
5. hill tracks
6. hunting
7. landed estates
8. natural environment
9. restoration

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