

The ongoing destructive impacts of grouse moor management – the case of Dinnet Moor

Description



Grouse moor management v native woodland and wildlife conservation.. Looking down the lower reaches of the Lary Burn – note the trap – April 2019. Photo credit, parkswatch reader.

It's now four years since I wrote about the potential for landscape scale conservation ([see here](#)) and the problem of bulldozed tracks ([see here](#)) on the Dinnet Estate. I have been meaning to explore the area further ever since so I was pleased recently to be sent some photos of the way the land is being managed around the Lary Burn, not far from the A939 which runs north west from Ballater through Glen Gairn (approx Grid Reference approximate grid ref is NJ 337 004).



The photos are from the area above the label at the woodland edge. The red line marks the Dinnet Estate boundary. Credit Cairngorms National Park Estate maps.

The photos provide a graphic illustration of the destructive impacts of intensive grouse moor management and of why the Cairngorms National Park Authority has been failing to achieve its ambition of landscape scale conservation.



Regenerating juniper scrub and woodland April 2019. Photo credit, parkswatch reader.

The positive side of intensive grouse moor management is that deer numbers tend to be kept very low. This allows woodland to regenerate naturally and here it's been expanding up the hillside. There is clearly enormous potential to create a montane scrub zone, a habitat almost entirely absent from Scotland and which the Cairngorms National Park Authority is keen to promote, by natural means.



An unburned area, April 2019. Photo credit, parkswatch reader.

Scandalously, however, as quickly as “good areas”, such as those in the photo above, develop, others are destroyed:



Burned juniper and felled tree April 2019. Photo credit, parkswatch reader.

The banks of burns in the uplands tend to have mineral, rather than peat soils, and so, where grazing is low, provide great potential for woodland regeneration. The promotion of riparian woodland is another priority for the CNPA, it's good for wildlife and can help reduce flooding, and there is clear evidence for this happening along the Lary Burn.



Tree felling along bank of Lary Burn. Photo credit, parkswatch reader.

As soon as the trees that are colonising the banks start to create woodland, they are being felled. No doubt Dinnet Estate's shooting tenants will claim this is better practice than burning to the water's edge, as happens at Invercauld ([see here](#)). Burning destabilises the banks and undermines flood prevention even further. (If you are concerned about this issue a petition to the Scottish Parliament calling for the proposed grouse moor licensing scheme to require landowners to promote natural flood prevention is open until 4th March ([see here](#))). But the adverse impacts of tree felling and muirburn along river banks for carbon absorption, wildlife biodiversity and flood prevention are very similar.

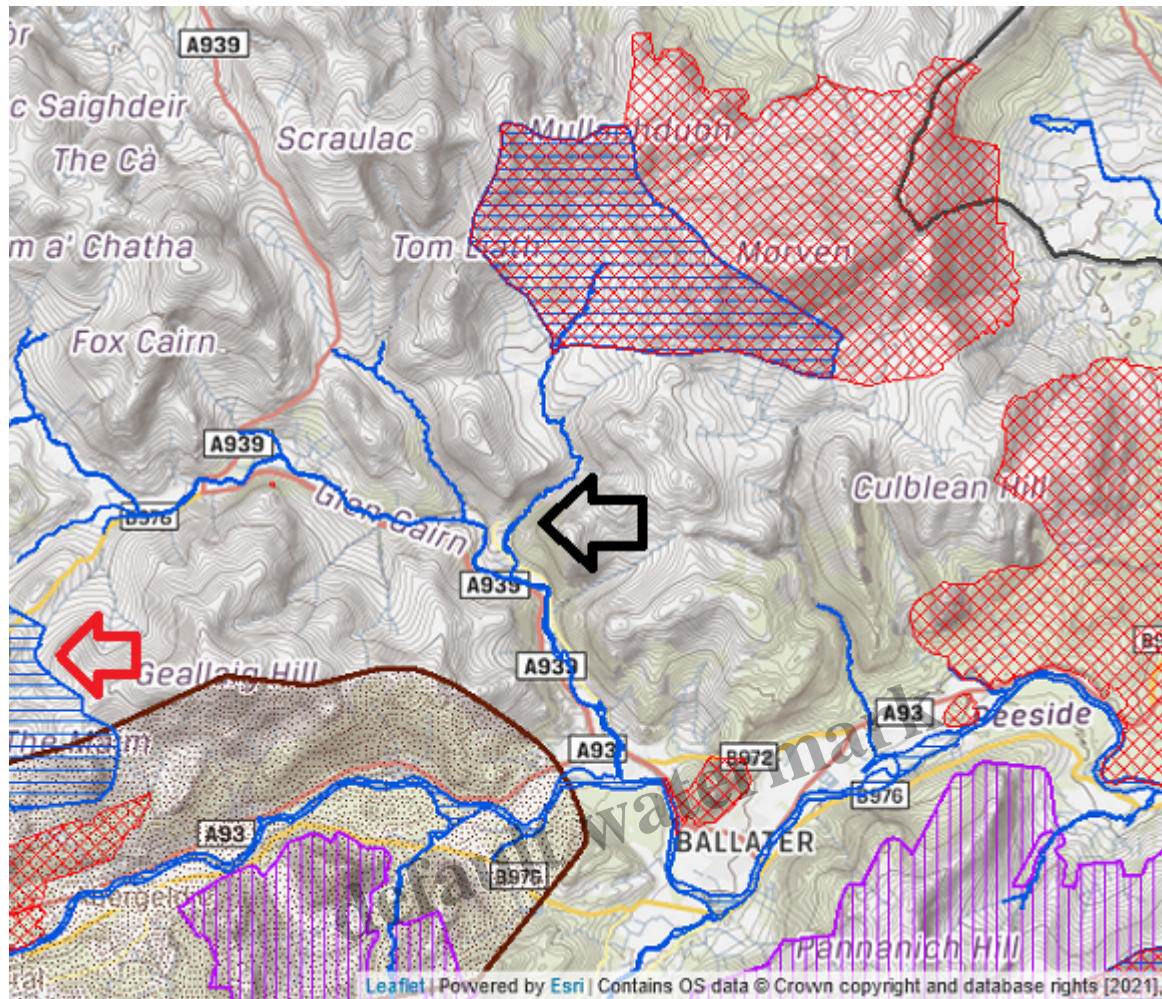
Despite the massive flood damage Ballater, not far downstream from the Lary Burn, suffered in December 2015 ([see here](#)), and despite the River Gairn catchment being one of the CNPA's target areas for woodland expansion, the destruction of woodland on the Dinnet Estate has continued.

Legitimised destruction



The view upstream – Lary Burn on right. Photo credit parkswatch reader.

Part of the reason this destruction is allowed to continue lies in Scotland's incoherent system for nature conservation. Just round the corner in the photo above, the Lary Burn is fed by the Morven burn, whose source is in the Morven Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC):



Black arrow marks area of photos; red arrow “The Maim”; the red hatched areas Sites of Special Scientific Interest; and the blue horizontal lines, Special Areas of Conservation



In the SSSI, the juniper is protected, but the area between that and the woodland areas near where the Lary Burn reaches the River Gairn, is burned to bits. The two areas have no chance of connecting to create conservation on a landscape scale.

The hypocrisy here is nicely illustrated by a piece of propaganda on Mountain Hares from the Grampian Moorland Group in 2016 ([The Untold Story – Mountain Hares](#)). In this (at 4:06 minutes) the Head Keeper for Dinnet Moor, describes how keen he is to cull Mountain Hares to protect juniper in the SSSI. No mention of how the juniper lower down was expanding quite naturally until it was burned! (Another fundamental contradiction in the video is it starts by suggesting (1 min) that foxes are the main predators of mountain hare, and therefore need to be controlled, but then justifies human intervention on the grounds that there are no predators).

The wider problem, however, is that our nature protection system, which is the responsibility of NatureScot, is focused not on promoting naturally functioning ecosystems, but on preserving degraded habitats like grouse moors. This is illustrated both by the way NatureScot has tolerated shooting of mountain hare (which become officially protected year round from tomorrow) but also in the way it

actually promotes muirburn in certain areas:



The southern edge of Maim SAC

Across Geallaig Hill from the Lary Burn, by the B976/Old Military Rd, is the Maim Special Area of Conservation on the Invercauld Estate. It was once woodland and provides another wonderful example of the potential for natural regeneration. However, it is now, as a result of grouse moor management, one of the largest areas of what is known as H16 habitat, a mix of bearberry and heather, in Scotland. It has been protected as such, without any consideration of whether this artificially created habitat has any value for wildlife or carbon absorption from the atmosphere. As a result periodic burning of the site is not just sanctioned, but officially promoted by NatureScot.



Maim, looking from the B976 up the slope towards Geallaig Hill

And that underpins the wider problem, once wildlife persecution or practices like muirburn are officially endorsed as legitimate means of promoting conservation in one area, its almost impossible to argue their use elsewhere. Perversely, our current system of nature conservation actually does more to conserve the interests of sporting estates than the natural environment.

The Dinnet lease and the need for Land Reform

The shooting at Dinnet Moor was leased out in November 2014 by the Dinnet Estate to Andrew Cameron Salvesen, a Director of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and close friend of Prince Charles ([see here](#)). The record of the title deed held by the Registers of Scotland shows the lease is for 25 years:

Description	
Subjects, part of cad DINNET MOOR, AB hectares in measure specified in the lease	
Notes	
1. The right of owner 2. The extent of the c at 4 Feb. 2019. To vi to the title sheet for t	
Short Particulars of the Lease under which the abo	
Entry No	Parties
1	Edward Charles Marcus Humphrey to Andrew Cameron Salvesen

The lease itself, however, does not appear to be available from the Land Registry. One can only assume from what has happened at the Lary Burn that it allows Mr Salvesen considerable leeway to manage the land as he wishes, with little consideration of the public interest. In my view no estate owners in our National Parks should be allowed to lease large areas of land to tenants unless those leases incorporate the statutory objectives of the National Park and the need for landscape scale

conservation. The law should be changed so our National Park Authorities are given a duty to vet leases as well as land purchases [\(see here\)](#).

The Dinnet Moor lease, however, raises wider issues. While the Registers of Scotland states the lease is with “*ANDREW CAMERON SALVESEN trading as DINNET MOOR having place of business at 17 Albert Street, Aberdeen, AB25 1XX*” I could find no such company or other legal entity with that name registered at Companies House.

Mr Salvesen was, however, until December (when his son replaced him) a Director of Findrack Investments Ltd:

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FINDRACK (INVESTMENTS) LIMITED

BALANCE SHEET

AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2019

	Notes	2019 £	£	2018 £	£
Fixed assets					
Tangible assets	3		-		2,594
Investment properties	4		4,208,952		4,095,747
Investments	5		60,019,862		53,356,550
			<u>64,228,814</u>		<u>57,454,891</u>
Current assets					
Debtors	6	171,996		207,991	
Cash at bank and in hand		9,212,370		7,824,605	
		<u>9,384,366</u>		<u>8,032,596</u>	
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year					
		<u>(98,849)</u>		<u>(326,205)</u>	
Net current assets			<u>9,285,517</u>		<u>7,706,391</u>
Total assets less current liabilities			<u>73,514,331</u>		<u>65,161,282</u>
Provisions for liabilities			<u>(3,644,488)</u>		<u>(2,353,163)</u>
Net assets			<u><u>69,869,843</u></u>		<u><u>62,808,119</u></u>
Capital and reserves					
Called up share capital			19,479,412		19,479,412
Profit and loss reserves			50,390,431		43,328,707
Total equity			<u><u>69,869,843</u></u>		<u><u>62,808,119</u></u>

While having assets of almost £70 million, the accounts are treated as those of a small company and the Directors have chosen not to provide a profit and loss account, which makes it difficult to understand why the value of the company's assets increased by £7m in a year. However, under Note 9 the following is noted as a future liability:

9 Operating lease commitments

Lessee

Operating lease payments represent rentals payable by the company for land. The leases term is 25 years, expiring in 2040. The level of rentals payable is reviewed every 5 years.

At the reporting end date the company had outstanding commitments for future minimum lease payments to the first rent review in November 2020, as follows:

2019	2018
£	£
18,356	38,356
<u> </u>	<u> </u>

The 25 year lease expiring in 2040 suggests that this is the lease for Dinnet Moor. If so, Mr Salvesen has been paying £38k a year for the sporting rights through his company Findrack Investments,

It's impossible to tell from the accounts, and I don't know enough about tax law, but the inclusion of such a lease in an investment company raises questions about whether somehow, quite legitimately, the cost of grouse shooting for personal pleasure is being offset against other tax liabilities? If so, our tax system would appear to be supporting intensive grouse moor management and the destruction of the natural environment.

In January Prince Charles launched his Terra Carta initiative to create fundamental rights for nature ([see here](#)). Perhaps it's time he spoke to his friend across the River Dee from Balmoral about how he manages Dinnet Moor?

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. flooding
4. grouse moors
5. land reform
6. landed estates
7. landscape
8. wildlife persecution

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