

The state of the western Cairngorms (6) – BrewDog’s “Lost Forest”(1)

Description

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The start of the Burma Road with a link to the Lost Forest proposal below

I have stretched the meaning of the “Cairngorms” in this series of posts, half of which have featured land west of the A9, and I am going to stretch it even further in two posts which take a look at Brewdog’s proposals to create a “Lost Forest” on the Kinrara estate which they bought earlier this year. Two weeks ago I cycled with Dave Morris, a map of the forest proposals in hand, up the Burma Rd to the watershed where we crossed over the Cairngorms National Park boundary and descended to the Dulnain. This first post will consider the part of Kinrara that lies within the National Park. The second will consider the larger part of the estate that lies within the catchment of the River Dulnain.



Looking over native woodland at Kinrara towards Braeriach, the Burma Rd visible on the left.

BrewDog are a very dynamic company, which is how they have done so well in the cut-throat world of capitalist competition. That is not without its costs ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)) but, in that, BrewDog is little different to other companies, including Asos, the clothing company which has made Anders Povslen a billionaire and enabled him to bankroll Wildland Ltd and the pioneering conservation work around Glen Feshie. While how Anders Povslen and BrewDog makes their money is not unimportant, this post will focus on what BrewDog are currently proposing to do at Kinrara and the rationale for this.

BrewDog’s dynamism and management style, however, is I believe relevant to understanding the initial proposals which have been developed by Scottish Woodlands and which are out for consultation until tomorrow ([see here](#)). BrewDog appears to take decisions very quickly. Having decided to go carbon neutral and that planting trees offered an important way to mitigate climate change and offset



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Rumour

has it that BrewDog's initial interest in Kinrara was sparked by the distillery, declared maker of the best contemporary Scottish Gin in March ([see here](#)) but when they saw the large areas of apparently treeless ground over the Dulnain watershed they quickly saw the opportunity to put their words into action and undertake a massive ecological restoration project. This they quickly claimed as *"the single biggest native woodland establishment and peatland restoration project ever in the UK"* and, in inimitable marketing style, *"as bigger than 18 actual countries"* ([see here](#)). Apparently they were unaware of what Wildland Ltd has been doing on the other side of the Spey and Anders Povlsen had to politely point this out to them ([see here](#)).

Had BrewDog, before they purchased the estate, been forced to talk and agree their plans with the Cairngorms National Park Authority – as parkswatch has advocated for all major land purchases in our National Parks – or been to visit Anders Povlsen who, in 2018, had purchased Kinrara House ([see here](#)), it is possible they might have realised they needed to think through how to implement their ideas more carefully. Instead, despite their acknowledgement of the importance of peat bogs and the potential for peat bog restoration on the estate, they commissioned a company called Scottish Woodlands to produce a woodland creation plan. What was – and still is needed – is a landscape-scale conservation plan which looks at the estate as a whole within the context of the land round about.

Scottish Woodlands proposals

Scottish Woodlands have produced what one would expect from where their expertise lies, a tree

planting plan, almost certainly designed to take full advantage of the current forestry subsidy system. Three concept maps and an accompanying letter explain their proposal :

Key Proposals

- Creation of several areas of new woodland throughout the estate, designed as a mix of woodland types complimenting those natural forests found locally
- Ensuring the newly planted areas are protected with deer fencing until they are successfully established
- Integrated areas of open habitat conserved as grassland and moorland for sensitive species and for landscape benefits
- Unimpeded public access in line with the Outdoor Access Code
- New woodland designed to complement the local landscape

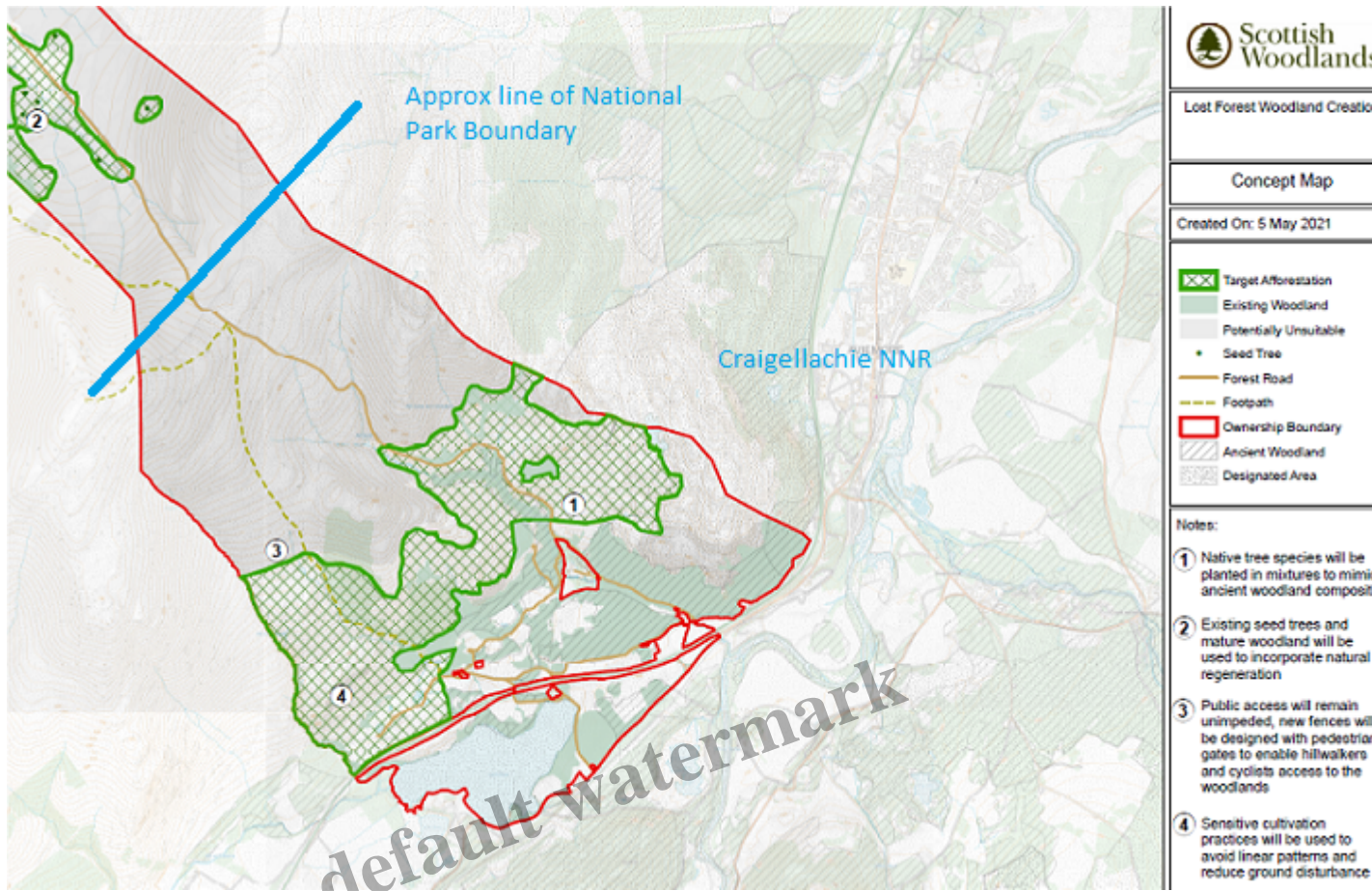
The 'Burma Road'

Opportunity to maintain unfettered public access and over the long term, improve the aesthetic setting of the landscape around this right of way.

The penultimate proposal about access, along with the caption about the

Burma Rd, is not a proposal at all and is legally wrong. The public in Scotland have a right of access whatever Scottish Woodlands thinks.

Set that aside, along with the other statements whose meaning is hard to fathom, and the proposal From Scottish Woodlands comes down to planting two large areas on either side of the watershed between the Spey and Dulnain, both of which are to be surrounded with deer fencing.



The proposals on the southern side of the watershed within the Cairngorms National Park boundary. The large area which it is proposed to fence and plant with native trees is marked by the dark green hatching.

In essence the proposal on the Strath Spey part of the estate is to extend the existing block of woodland up the hill by planting a swathe of native trees above and to incorporate within this the finger of native woodland which currently extends up the Allt Dubh.



The finger of well established native woodland up the Allt Dubh reaches to c400m

Our ride up the Burma Rd showed there is absolutely no need for this planting..



Muirburn has had a significant impact on the extent of woodland on the estate

Scottish Woodlands make not a single reference to muirburn in their consultation documents. That is despite the extensive muirburn which the previous owners of the estate carried out in the areas which Scottish Woodlands are now proposing should be planted. With all the obvious seed sources nearby, both the established woodland and the isolated pines on the hillside, it should be equally obvious that natural regeneration could take off very quickly now the muirburn has stopped.

Indeed, the dozens of burnt patches should make it easier and quicker for new seeds to become established. Those bare areas, ripe for colonisation, are supplemented by the extensive areas of bare mineral soils that have been created along the Burma Rd by “improvement works”.



These works, which include the creation of several new borrow pits, never appear to have had planning permission. BrewDog could do with a landscape plan as well as a tree creation plan.

While elsewhere landowners have scarified ground to try and speed up rates of natural regeneration, Scottish Woodlands makes no mention of how past destructive land-management practices might impact on the potential speed of natural regeneration here.



Fenced enclosure above the Burma Rd, part of which has been planted but the upper part of which is regenerating naturally.

There is obvious evidence of the potential for natural regeneration within the proposed planting area visible on the hillside. The fencing, however, points to the second major issue that BrewDog needs to tackle and which is also not mentioned once by Scottish Woodlands, the impact of overgrazing by deer.



While easily missed by the casual observer, if you take a moment to stop and look, there are already plenty of trees all the way up the section of the Burma Rd that Scottish Woodlands is proposing to plant. The issue is that most are below the heather and get browsed off the moment their heads emerge, if not sooner.



It is not just pine, there are also birch in the heather.

Scottish Woodlands' woodland consultation ducks the deer issue. It says nothing about the numbers of deer on Kinrara, how these fluctuate over the course of the year or their impacts. Instead, they propose to build fences around the "new" woodland area to keep the deer out. All that will do is displace the deer and the problems they cause elsewhere while creating unnatural areas of evenly

aged native trees.



Pine seedlings by the Burma Rd as it crosses the watershed at c670m and the path up to the Corbett, Geal Charn Mor. We found seven in an area less than 10m². As in most of the Cairngorms, there are actually tree seeds everywhere, including places far from any obvious seed source (seeds can be blown miles over the snow, get carried by birds etc). But the majority never develop into anything visible because of grazing. The seedlings at the top of the Burma Rd, featured in the photo above, have almost certainly only grown this big because high levels of recreational use by mountain bikers and walkers in the area help keep the deer away.

This points to another failing in Scottish Woodlands proposals. They say nothing about the potential for montane scrub development on the higher ground. A lost opportunity.

What needs to happen

Set aside the hype, BrewDog have got the most important thing right at Kinrara, there is a Lost Forest. The problem is that instead of engaging ecologists who could have advised them on how to let this forest emerge naturally – the basic answer is simple, stop muirburn and reduce deer numbers as they have done in Glen Feshie – they have asked traditional foresters to come up with a plan and they have come up with a proposal that involves planting all over the Lost Forest.

While Scottish Woodlands make some references to “natural regeneration” – see two in key to map above – it appears to play a secondary and rather vague role in their plans. This needs to be turned on its head so that natural regeneration is put first. There could still be some potential for planting on on the Strath Spey part of the estate. For example, shortly after the start of the Burma Road there is a grassy area off to the right, that appears to have been used for sheep grazing, where planting might be justified:



The grassy area off the Burma Rd. Off to the right across the hillside is the Craigellachie National

Nature Reserve. The woodland there would also expand naturally into Kinrara if grazing levels were reduced, so it's important the BrewDog do not allow any planting to extend to the edges of the Reserve, as Scottish Woodlands appears to be proposing in their current plans..

There also might be an argument for planting some areas of montane willow higher up along water courses or the disturbed edges of the Burma Rd if detailed ecological surveys show these species are now absent from the area.

Apart from that, however, BrewDog's main focus should be on bringing deer numbers down. BrewDog want to be seen to act fast and they have the ideal opportunity to do that with respect to overgrazing by deer. The stag stalking season started on 1st July. One wonders how many stags they have shot to date?

And if BrewDog feel constrained by the current stalking seasons, they could always call on the Scottish Government to implement the recommendations of the Deer Working Group to abolish the closed season for stag shooting before the 20th October, when the current stag stalking season ends. That would be just in time for the COP26 conference. If BrewDog could persuade the Scottish Government to do that, they would enable the main constraint on natural regeneration in Scotland to be removed. That would then result in far more trees than BrewDog could ever plant at Kinrara.

It would also enable BrewDog to retain/re-employ some or all of the gamekeepers that have been threatened with redundancy ([see here](#)) -assuming they would be prepared to accept a new role.

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Natural regeneration in the plantation below the grassy areas pictured above. A thicket is developing due to the absence of grazing animals.

Then, as deer number reduce, BrewDog could remove all the existing deer fences from the estate allowing the woodland to develop far more naturally and facilitating unimpeded access across the land.

There is a massive opportunity for BrewDog at Kinrara but a traditional tree planting plan, as proposed by Scottish Woodlands, will not deliver that. BrewDog should ask Scottish Woodlands to go back to the drawing board. The case for doing that is even greater over the watershed in the Dulnain which I will consider in my next post.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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