

Plastic tree tubes – time for our National Park planners to act

Description



The landscaping around the hydro station in Upper Glen Falloch, with Caledonian Forest behind in 2020.

In my recent post criticising the use of plastic tree tubes to plant woodland in the Cairngorms ([see here](#)), I argued that tree shelters wouldn't be necessary if nature was not so out of kilter – primarily due to sporting land management. The addition of the native woodland planting business to tree tubes, however, goes deeper than that. Like fencing, plastic tree tubes are now used almost as a matter of course with no regard to the circumstances.

I have previously remarked on this in respect of landscape planting around developments in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. For example, the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) allowed deciduous native trees to be planted in tree tubes within the new fenced area around the upper Glen Falloch hydro station. This was in sight of the most southerly remnant of the Caledonian pine forest in Scotland and pre-empted the opportunity to extend that through natural regeneration. That is likely to have been particularly rapid due to the mineral soils exposed by the hydro construction works.

The landscaping argument against this is twofold. First, that whatever the soils, tree shelters enable trees to grow even faster, screening ugly developments and absorbing carbon out of the atmosphere. Second, that even where areas are fenced, there is still a need to protect trees from grazing animals.

Both parts of the argument are flawed, the first fundamentally. Any carbon absorbed from the atmosphere by the tree, however quickly it grows, is temporary. It can never compensate for the concentrated carbon that is extracted from beneath the earth's surface to make plastic. There may be an argument for the use of tree tubes made out of other materials, but the use of plastic is fundamentally damaging. If we want to mitigate climate change we need to stop using non-essential plastics now.

As for the impact of grazing animals, if nature is out of kilter and there are no predators to keep down the numbers of hares, rabbits, voles etc they may well present a serious threat to tree planting. In my view that risk, where it occurs, could be largely fixed if the persecution of predators in our National Parks was stopped. But at present the planning system doesn't even consider whether there is any risk. Instead it approves landscaping proposals without any consideration of the need for planted saplings to be protected.



The Cononish goldmine car park at Dalrigh with tree tubes visible on either side.

I came across a good example of this a couple of weeks ago at the new car park at Dalrigh. The car park was consented back in 2017 as part of the Cononish goldmine development and constructed before the main work started.



Note the natural regeneration on the far side of the fencing

It is not difficult to find far worse examples of the use of tree tubes in landscaping. The ones around the Cononish car park have been used relatively sparsely – so in theory should be easy to remove eventually – and the colour of the plastic, while standing out in winter, is acceptable.



Jazzed up plastic tree tubes on the Cunningar Loop, East Glasgow, on land managed by Forest and Land Scotland. Photo credit Fiona Mackinnon.

While some of the problems commonly associated with the use of tree tubes are evident at the Dalrigh car park, they could be a lot worse. Most of the trees so far have survived and most are still fairly upright:





But the key point is that just outside the new car park and all around the older car park native woodland has been regenerating perfectly naturally without human interference:



Even if the Scotgold, the developers, had wanted to plant some different trees to increase the diversity of species found on the site or for screening purposes, plastic tree tubes would not have been necessary on this site. And so it is for lots of places across Scotland as you can see from all the natural regeneration along roads and railways. Unfortunately, our planning system is so unfit for purpose when it comes to the environment and climate change that it doesn't even take account of this.



Car park extension approved as part of the goldmine planning application with tree planting proposal marked by the green circles.

After my visit I checked the planning application and could find no information about HOW the trees were to be planted. While there are many reasons to criticise Scotgold's development, I am not criticising them for this: like other large developers, they leave such issues to their landscape consultants.

Even if awareness of the environmental impact of plastic was only growing in 2017, a world-beating National Park might have picked up the issues before the car park was eventually built. Neither of our National Parks have any excuse now. They should be checking every development proposal that has been approved and vetting all new developments that includes tree planting to ensure they are plastic free. That should be part of a much more rigorous approach to the way they assess the impact of developments on the natural environment. If we cannot even stop the use of plastic tree tubes in our National Parks, we are not going to change anything.

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