

The Cairngorms through the lens of Adam Watson, then and now (1) â?? Glen Feshie

Description



1983.06 Dave Morris at collapsed track Glen Feshie. Photo Credit Adam Watson.

Dave Morris paid tribute to Adam Watson, the great ecologist of the Cairngorms, shortly after his death ([see here](#)) but Parkswatch has done little else to celebrate and promote his work and legacy. Over the last year Jenny Aitchison, Adamâ??s daughter, has been sending me copies of photos he took in the Cairngorms, starting with Cairn Gorm itself. It is an incredible record, which will be deposited in the special collections at Aberdeen University, and I have been wondering how best to make use of the photos on parkswatch.

Whence the idea for a series of posts over the course of 2022 comparing what Adam observed with what is happening now. And because the new year is traditionally a time for optimism, there is no better place to start with a couple of Adamâ??s photos of Glen Feshie.



1983.06 collapsed track Glen Feshie, above Ruigh Aiteachain bothy where the glen narrows. Photo Credit Adam Watson.

These two photos from Adam show that in 1983 Glen Feshie was in a terrible state. The Caledonian Pine Forest was dying and ground vegetation had been grazed to its roots, creating patches of bare earth. The land was disintegrating, as it still is elsewhere in the Cairngorms National Park ([see here](#)), the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park ([see here for example](#)) and much of the rest of Scotland ([see here](#)). The primary reason of course was, and still is, overgrazing.

Adam and those he influenced, like Dick Balharry and Dave Morris who is featured in the top photo, understood the cause of the problem. But when Dave, then employed by the Nature Conservancy and working out of their Aviemore office, tried to make the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve worthy of the name and tackle the deer issue, Lord Dulverton, who then owned Glen Feshie, spoke to the powers that be and had him transferred down to Peterborough!

That power of the traditional sporting estate landowners has hardly changed. But twenty years ago Glen Feshie was bought by the first of a new type of landowner, one which saw that what was important was the state of the land as a whole, not the numbers of deer and red grouse. The transformation of the land shown in Adam's photos has been dramatic.



I had walked up Glen Feshie beyond Ruigh Aiteachain at the end of November, on a mixed day with a faulty camera, and before I had received Adam's photos of the collapsed track and landslip. My two photos therefore don't provide an exact comparison of then with now, while the track has since the landslip taken a different route up the glen. But my poor photos still show enough: instead of bare earth, with the river bank vulnerable to erosion from every flood, a profusion of vegetation.



On the walk, we passed the site of the landslip which is still very obvious but is now covered with vegetation which is slowly reducing the rate of erosion. I thought it worth a photo but unfortunately my camera had almost packed up at that point – if any reader is up there, further photos would be gratefully received! It’s a place that every member of the Cairngorms National Park Board, the Minister for National Parks and indeed those custodians of the the traditional sporting estate, the Royal Family, should visit.

For people wanting to get a sense of what Adam Watson was like as a person, I highly recommend the podcast from the BBC archives of Adam walking the Lairig Ghru with Tom Weir. This was published by Scotland Outdoors on 29th December and is available for the next year ([see here](#)). The breadth of subjects covered is extraordinary. It includes Adam talking about the impact of extreme rain events and landslips in the Lairig Ghru (at 13 mins 30 seconds), three years after the photos featured in this post.

Adam was – like Dave Morris and as he recorded on parkswatch – shunned by much of the Scottish establishment for speaking the truth about what was happening in the Cairngorms. No place on the National Park Board for the likes of him. His photos provide evidence for many of the arguments he was involved with at the time and, as I hope to demonstrate over the course of the year, that in much of the Cairngorms not much has changed. His concerns about what was happening in the Cairngorms remain as relevant as ever.

But to start on an optimistic note, Adam's Glen Feshie photos show dramatic change for the better is possible. Its a tempting metaphor to say that he would be smiling from heaven.

Happy New Year!

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Caledonian Pine Forest
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. landslips
5. sporting estates

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Author

nickkempe

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