

Sheep farming and peatland restoration in Strathfillan and Glen Falloch

Description



Eroded peat bog on Fiarach

The same flock of sheep that are slowly killing off part of the Coille Coire Chuilc Caledonian Pine remnant ([see here](#)) appear to be destroying areas of peat bog on the broad summit ridge of Fiarach, the hill above. It's on the same landholding, Auchreoch, bought by Richard Bayman Lewis of Killin for £240k in 2014.



View south from the amazing dolerite dyke that forms the summit of Fiarach. Ewich Forest, sold off by Forest and Land Scotland, is in the middle ground and Crianlarich behind on the far left.

Some of the peat bog erosion on Fiarach is likely to be natural. Peat bogs tend to develop on flatter water-logged areas but as they grow they can expand onto better drained sloping ground below developing that into peat bog too. As the bog grows over hundreds of years gravity starts to play an increasing influence and the vegetation at the edge can start to breakdown. This phenomenon is visible in the line of exposed peat to the right of the ridge in the photo (although it is likely to have been made worse by grazing animals – I didn't go to have a closer look).

But elsewhere there there is little “natural” about the erosion which is being caused by human land-use:



Heath rush and cotton grass attempting to re-colonise exposed peat

And how can I be so confident about this? Rarely can I recall having seen so many obvious signs of grazing animals on a peat bog.



Sheep droppings and hoof marks

The sheep are preventing vegetation from recolonising the bare peat and damaging the peat bog further. Sheep bog might be a more appropriate term. All the trampling and browsing is causing the bog to breakdown and release carbon into the atmosphere, the opposite of what the Scottish Government claims it wants for Scotland.



Note the animal track on the right of the eroded area. Water is now starting to flow across the eroded area eroding it further.

The damage that is being caused by the sheep extends beyond the Auchreoch landholding.



View west, over peat hags and snow patches, towards Beinn Dubhcraig from the dyke that forms the top of Fiarach. Note the severely eroded peat bottom left.

Most of the view in the photo is part of the neighbouring property, the Strathfillan Forest plantation. Their owners appear to be only interested in the returns to be made from commercial forestry, not how the rest of the land is used so tolerate incursions by sheep. The deer fence which used to enclose much of the Strathfillan Forest landholding is well gone and allows sheep to wander at will:



Deer fencing doesn't last long – about five years without maintenance – and is therefore not a solution to the grazing issue in our National Parks

The irony is that the Scottish Government not only allows commercial forestry owners to ignore the impact of grazing once trees are established, they could well be paying for the destruction by sheep. I have checked the DEFRA Rural Payment database and while there are no records in the same name as the title deeds (Richard Bayman Lewis of Killin) there is this record:

Payment Details

Beneficiary Code:

Beneficiary Name: MR RICHARD LEWIS

Town/ City: KILLIN

Postcode: FK21

Year: 2019

MEASURE DESCRIPTION	PAYMENT
Other direct aids	£9,032.41
Payments to areas facing natural and other specific constraints	£7,677.04
Reimbursement of financial discipline	£211.13
Basic payment scheme	£9,880.62
Greening: practices beneficial for climate and environment	£2,532.47
Payment for young farmers	£443.60

If it is the same Richard Lewis, there is no guarantee of course that the payment is for the land at Fiarach and Coille Choire Cuilc, but it could be.

The point of what follows is not to criticise Mr Lewis – people will make a living any way they can and there will be dozens of similar examples across Scotland – but to show how Scotland's Rural Payments system subsidises landowners to do the opposite of what is in the public interest.

Consider this. If the payments are for the Auchreoch landholding, it appears that in 2019 the Scottish Government paid out almost £30k in subsidies to support sheep farming that has helped to destroy an area of Caledonian Pine Forest that we have been attempting to protect for 50 years. And not just that but the peat bog above.

To add insult to injury £2,532.47 of this was for “greening practices beneficial for climate and environment”.

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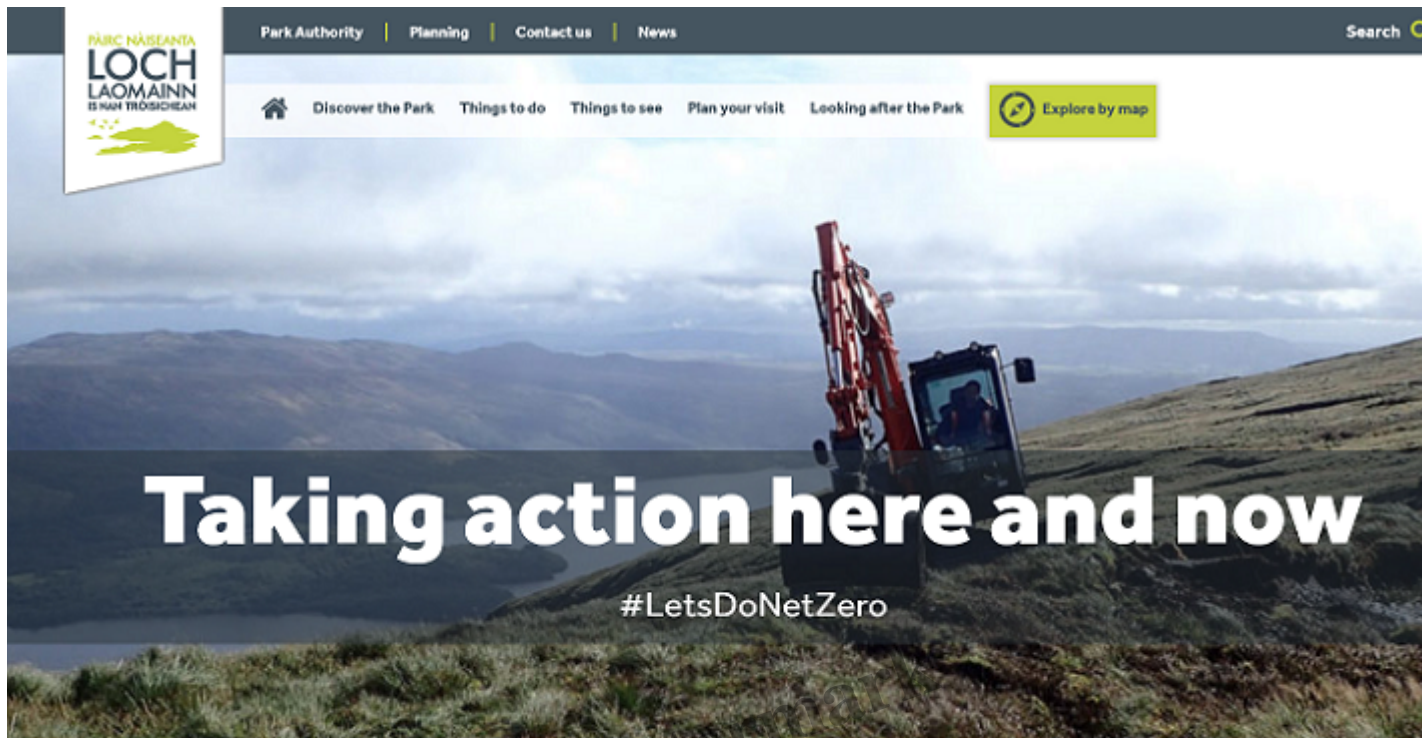
MEASURE DESCRIPTION	PAYMENT
Other direct aids	£8,237.11
Payments to areas facing natural and other specific constraints	£4,211.56
Reimbursement of financial discipline	£204.83
Basic payment scheme	£4,919.63
Greening: practices beneficial for climate and environment	£2,327.73
Payment for young farmers	£221.30

While the total payment in 2020 was almost £10k less than in 2019, it was still over £20k. If it is for Auchreoch that is a pretty good return on land that cost on £240k, c10% a year.

Imagine that Auchreoch had been bought by one of our public authorities, as I suggested in my last post, or by the local community and they had been paid this money to manage it? They could have removed the sheep, employed a part time stalker to keep the deer numbers down and let nature do the rest: the pine wood and the land above would now be regenerating. That could have been quite a tourist attraction and helped create new jobs.

What's more, some of the £250m that the Scottish Government has now allocated for peat bog restoration, could have been used to repair the damaged areas on Fiarach secure in the knowledge

that the money wouldn't be wasted.



The current photos on the LLTNPA's home page. The LLTNPA is failing to take action except where it is in the interests of landowners to do so and #LetsDoNetZero is an empty green slogan

Rather than tackling the underlying problems at places like Fiarach – not easy but absolutely necessary if we are to tackle nature and climate emergencies – the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) appears to be handing out peat bog restoration money to any landowner who will take it, with no accounting for whether this is in the public interest or represents value for money. The process by which this huge subsidy is agreed appears even more secretive than the rural payments scheme.

The LLTNPA has published a short video on the peat bog restoration work that has been undertaken not far over the hill from Fiarach, in Glen Falloch ([see here](#)). It features the owner of the Glen Falloch estate, David Lowes, stating that restoring the area of peat bog above Loch Lomond was “a no brainer”. With the Scottish Government paying, it certainly was from his point of view.

But what about the public interest?

Overgrazing by sheep on the Site of Scientific Interest that covers the hills on the south side of Glen Falloch has been responsible for it being in unfavourable condition for years. Those sheep might or might not have contributed to the erosion of the peat bog featured in the video. But surely the public should have a right to know is whether we are now paying to repair damage caused by the landowner?

And looking to the future, what mechanisms have been put in place to ensure David Lowes keeps

sheep, whether his or any tenant's, off the bog from now on? And what, if anything, is there to prevent the Mr Lowes now capitalising on this public investment and selling off this bit of land for an inflated price for carbon offsetting purposes like the Ralia Estate has done with SLIPIT ([see here](#))?

It's time the Scottish Parliament started to scrutinise both the rural payments scheme and the peatbog restoration fund to assess how far they are meeting climate and nature objectives and represent value for money. Our National Park Authorities should have been taking a lead and doing this very work but sadly they are too in hock to landowning interests and staff on the ground not allowed to this.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. conservation
3. LLTNPA
4. peat bogs
5. Scottish Government

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