

Why even conservation-minded landowners are still practising muirburn in the Cairngorms National Park

Description



Muirburn above Slochd 15th January 2021, approx grid reference NH 850 250 – photo credit parkswatch reader

Following my post [Fires, hypocrisy and access rights](#) in which I had described seeing a wall of fire as I crossed over Slochd into the Cairngorms National Park, a reader sent me a couple of photos they had taken the same day. The photo featured above is looking over to Slochd from the south: if you look carefully you can see a second plume of smoke on the left of the photo which appears to have been caused by the fire I witnessed.

The second photo is of a fire not far outside the Cairngorms National Park boundary:



Muirburn in the Dulnain catchment at NH 824 203 15th January. Note the large pine in the middle distance – its seeds, which might have blown across much of the area when it was covered with snow, don't have a hope.

All three fires appear to have been lit on the Seafield Estate:



Cairngorms Estate Management Map

That the Seafield Estate is still allowing muirburn to be carried out on its land is very disappointing:.

“Heather is also an important resource and, while grouse shooting is less of an economic driver for the Estate now than in previous years, considerable planning and manpower is still required to retain and promote heather growth, and burning and cutting are important aspects of today’s moorland management.” [\(see here\)](#)

On the one hand the estate appears to be trying hard to bring down deer numbers on the River Dulnain, so that the Caledonian Pine Forest along the river is now regenerating, and is heavily involved in the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project, set up to help prevent that bird become extinct. But on the other hand the estate continues to allow land it owns – some may be leased out – to be burned. This effectively prevents the Caledonian Pine Forest from expanding again, when what species like the capercaillie need is more habitat.

As for Slochd, I came across this in Ecology and Land Use in Upland Scotland, the textbook for radical ecologists in Scotland 50 years ago:

Slochd Mor, Inverness-shire (plate 7). This rocky cutting borders the A9 road and the Perth to Inverness railway line between the villages of Carrbridge and Tomatin. The original vegetation here was almost certainly pine–juniper forest but the cleft itself probably carried a patch of mixed broad-leaved trees on acid brown soil under the influence of water percolation from the bedrock. Burning and grazing at some time in the past seem to have led to the development of a good bent–fescue turf on the brown soil and heather moor with juniper scrub on the mor humus of the surrounding slopes. Today, scree formation is taking place rapidly on the heather slopes, the grass turf is fragmented and the brown soil mostly gone. Few junipers remain and even the heather has been killed out in patches through repeated burning and continuous sheep grazing. Here was a local patch of enhanced fertility and shelter that should have been conserved from both economic and aesthetic points of view; it is doubtful if the full rehabilitation treatment of fencing and protection from fire could save much from the wreck now. (Map reference: NH 840252)

D N McVean and J.D.Lockie 1969

Slochd might well have been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest in the 1970s if it had not been so trashed by muirburn. Nothing has changed in 50 years and still we allow the current capitalist system – which sets the context for all land management – to march on destroying nature and the climate before it. I am, however, more optimistic than McVean and Lockie: if we stopped muirburn and brought deer numbers down, places like the Slochd could recover and become special again. The challenge is how we finance this.

In his foreword to the most recent Seafield and Strathspey Estates newsletter ([see here](#)), Lord Seafield gets the connection between how primary land-use activities both contribute to climate change and are affected by it. But while mentioning agriculture and forestry, and acknowledging the devastating impacts that storm and drought can have on these activities, he is silent on grouse moor management.

While, as Lord Seafield points out in his article, almost 30% of the Strathspey Estate's land is covered in forest, managed both commercially and for nature, the estate website ([see here](#)) shows even more is managed as grouse moor:

Land use (approximate areas)

	Acres	Hectares
Let farms	12,529	5,070
Commercial woodland	12,313	4,983
Sporting:		
Grouse moors	20,000	8,094
Deer forest	4,600	1,862
Salmon Fishing:		
16 miles double bank		
5.5 miles single bank		
Other areas	4,408	1,784
Totals	53,850	21,793



The Estate employs 8 people in sporting (plus beaters as required) plus 6 in administration (3 part time)

Other information

Number of farm tenancies - 40

Number of residential tenants - 38

Annual revenue turnover - £1.5m*

Annual property maintenance expenditure - £250,000*

For more information www.strathspey-estate.co.uk

To give Seafield Estates credit, the extent of woodland cover on their land far exceeds the measly 23% which the Cairngorms National Park Authority set as its target in its draft National Park Partnership Plan ([see here](#)), even if it's still well below the European average of 38%. If Seafield stopped the muirburn and controlled the deer, they could probably reach European levels of woodland cover in 20 years. The problem, however, is finance as the estate website suggests:

"The sporting operations, including grouse moors, are managed entirely commercially rather than for the benefit of the proprietor.

Sporting shooting is labour intensive. While revenue comes from only a few days sport, there is a continual programme of vermin control and moor maintenance. The sport is expensive to supply and operate but it enables essential land management to be financed and helps maintain our beautiful Scottish uplands. Shooting supports rural families and jobs and brings considerable foreign currency into the local economy. Shooting sports receive no subsidy from the EU or the UK Treasury."

To put it another way, the estate employs significant number of people to destroy wildlife – "vermin" – and burn the land because this brings in income which not only supports other estate activities but helps the local economy. Where I disagree with the estate is that muirburn keeps the uplands beautiful: land denuded of nature is in my view ugly. But whatever the arguments about aesthetics, the finances are bonkers. We are allowing large areas of land to be destroyed ecologically in order to finance conservation land-use in other areas.

Estates like Seafield, which in my view are partly trying to do the right thing, will never be able to resolve these contradictions on their own. Unlike Wild Land Ltd at Glen Feshie, which is doing the right thing, or the Royal Family on Deeside, which isn't ([see here](#)), they are not owned by people who are extremely

wealthy. Both Anders Povlsen and Prince Charles have access to stashes of cash and can do what they want, the one good, the other bad. If we want to change land-management on estates like Seafield, we have to change the current subsidy system for land-management in Scotland so that it enables such estates to do the right thing for the climate and for nature.

In my view, Scotland's National Parks should be leading the way on this, which is why the Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan is so disappointing. It contains not a single practical proposal that will enable and support estates like Seafield to change.

While that will require more public investment, much of this could come from re-directing forestry and agricultural subsidies which are currently being wasted. For example, at the end of last week I received the consultation documents for the first stage of BrewDog's Lost Forest at Kinrara (which borders Seafield's land at Kinveachy). It includes proposals for extensive new deer fencing and the mounding of peaty soils to plant trees) – funded by public subsidy – when if BrewDog reduced deer numbers, the forest would regenerate naturally (more about this soon). Perhaps the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), which does state in its draft National Park Partnership Plan that its preference is for woodland to expand by natural regeneration, could take the opportunity to propose an alternative to the current forestry subsidy system?

Unfortunately, the CNPA appears unlikely to do this when it has so many conservative land-management interests on its Board and when conservation organisations remain so silent about damaging practices like muirburn. Last week, the latest John Muir Trust newsletter dropped through my letterbox and I was disappointed but not that surprised to read the following statement under "Latest Consultation Responses" [UPDATE: NB see comment below from Mike Daniels of JMT]

"we also contributed to the Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan draft and welcome it as a bold and ambitious plan for nature's recovery in the Cairngorms National Park".

Really? 23% woodland cover by 2045 and limited proposals to end muirburn on peat over 50cm deep, ambitious?

JMT's Board should read McVean and Lockie and in my view their members need to pressurise JMT as an organisation to start taking a more radical stance about land-use. Sadly, many of the landowning NGOs in Scotland seem as incapable of challenging the current system, which is destroying nature and releasing carbon into the atmosphere, as traditional landowners. And like our public agencies, as I will come back to in my next post, many NGOs are devoting far more effort to trying to stop visitors to the countryside from lighting fires – a small issue in the scheme of things – than they do to trying to stop muirburn and change the public subsidy system to support that.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. climate change
2. CNPA
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