

Tree planting in the western Cairngorms (1) – how not to expand the Caledonian Pine Forest

Description



Forest and Land Scotland's Caledonian Pine wood restoration in the McAlpine Plantation Glen More

On Sunday I was on Speyside, had 40 minutes to spare and decided to go for a run from the outflow of Loch Morlich to have a look at the work that is being done in the McAlpine plantation by Forest and Land Scotland (FLS) as part of Cairngorms Connect:



Extract from presentation by Cairngorms Connect to Cairngorms National Park Upland Advisory Group February 2020

Not far along the track from Loch Morlich, where it forks, there were the usual warning signs about forest operations as well as information about what FLS is doing:



The intention of this work is good, even if it had been prompted and brought forward from 2022-26 by the threat of disease which now threatens all forest mono-cultures.

The restoration work that first comes into sight along the Lairig Ghru track appears to have been done sympathetically and is not dissimilar to the photo in the Cairngorms Connect slide:



Looking over the felled area to the east of the Lairig Ghru track towards the ski area. Note how the Scots pine which regenerated among the lodgepole planting have been preserved along with significant quantities of blaeberry but also the spruce and larch in the foreground that have been “missed”.



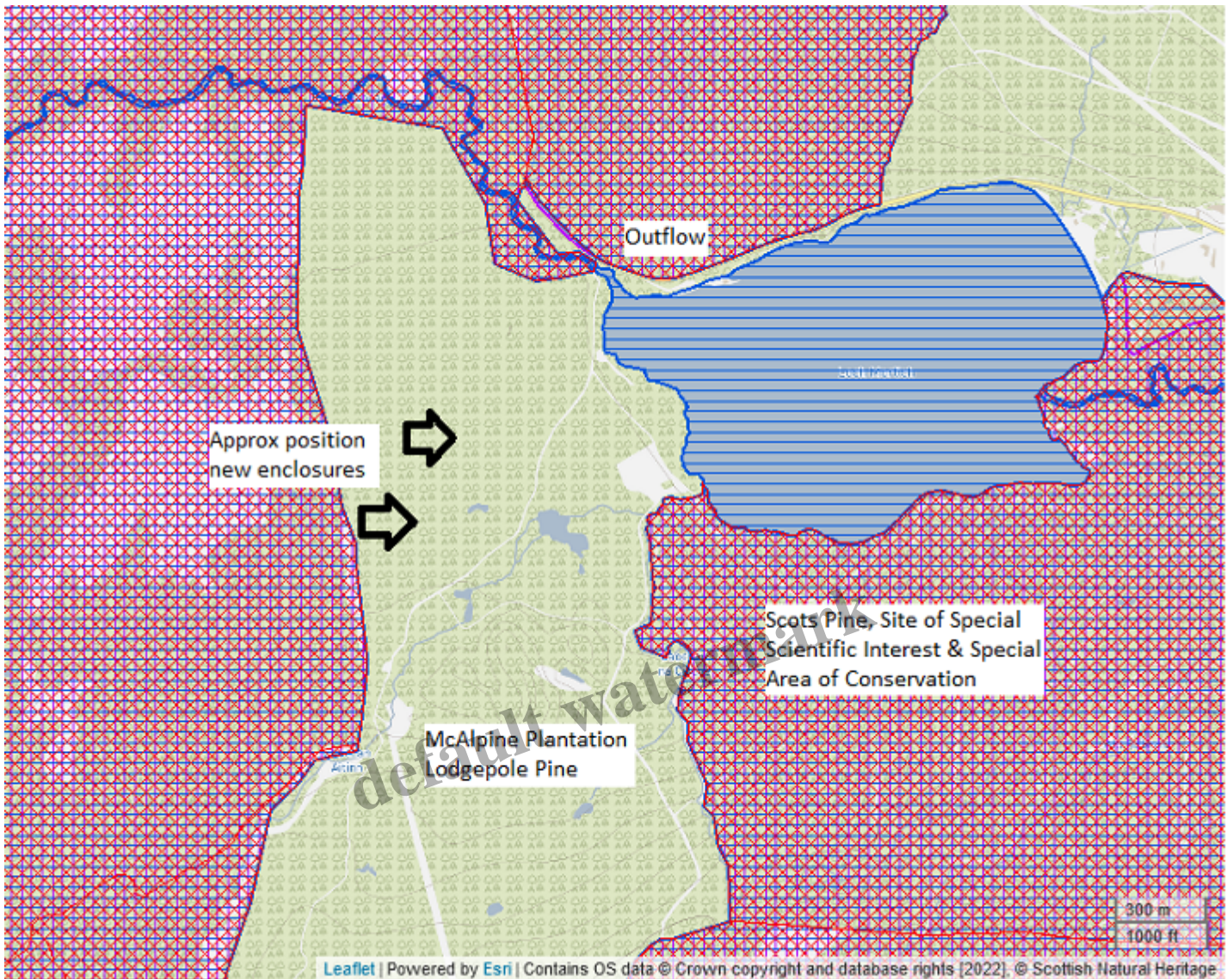
Looking back over the felled area to the north and west of the track towards Meall a' Bhuachaille

Shortly afterwards I spotted new fenced enclosures set back from the track and went over to have a look:



If it looks bad it normally is bad

That this has been allowed to happen not just in the Cairngorms National Park but in the Cairngorms Connect area should be a cause of major public concern.



A little history

The area covered by the McAlpine plantation was once Caledonian forest but was consumed by a large fire which burned from the 3rd – 11th June 1960 ([see here](#)). My understanding is that Colonel Grant, the then owner of the Rothiemurchus estate, had initially wanted to let the forest regenerate naturally but was then forced by the Forestry Commission (FC), as was their usual practice at the time, to re-plant it with non-native lodgepole pine.



Lodgepole pine at the start of the track with Scots pine behind. Both trees have needles which grow in pairs, but the lodgepole pine's are longer and brighter green.

In 2013 FLS, FC's successor, agreed a 99 year lease with the Rothiemurchus Estate for the McAlpine plantation. It then converted this into freehold the following year as part of the secretly negotiated deal in which Scottish Ministers bought Rothiemurchus Estate for £7.2m ([see here](#)). While it is poetic – or should that be environmental? – justice that FLS are now having to address problems caused by their predecessor on this bit of Rothiemurchus, financially they appear to have bought a liability not an asset.



An example of what “messy at first” means? The brash which blankets the ground in place is, if left in place likely to shade out other vegetation and hinder natural regeneration for many years.

What has gone wrong?

In April 2021 FLS consulted on its draft land management plan for Strath Spey which it then submitted to Scottish Forestry, the regulator, in September ([see here](#)). There is a section in the plan about Rothiemurchus which contains a reference to the removal of the McAlpine plantation:

Rothiemurchus	Woodland Expansion	Water bodies / geological features / landmarks	Medium	There will be only minor woodland expansion as most is already well wooded. In the more open areas, views from walking routes will be managed to retain views to landmarks and features. Majority of expansion would be through natural regeneration of native species on the open hill to the south of this area (see montane woodland creation below)
	Woodland restructuring	Woodland cover Woodland shape	Medium	Removal of non-native conifers from former commercial plantations will take place over a short time span in MacAlpine Plantation. This opening up will have a dramatic effect on views and internal woodland character. A sudden change which will slowly close in again. Shape and extent will be softened in part by the retention of Scots pine / birch, where they exist. Straight edges of retained stands of Scots pine will be thinned to reduce geometric edges where it can be done without affecting forest stability. Where natural regeneration fails to occur infill planting with native species will be carried out – linear rows of planting should be avoided to allow for a natural forest to establish.
	Riparian Woodland	Rivers / smooth landform / glacial and alluvial features		Little change to riparian woods is envisaged within this area. Rivers are dynamic and no active management to restrict it will be carried out.
	Deer fencing	Geological features / water bodies / smooth landform	Medium low	No deer fencing is being proposed. Deer numbers are controlled with no requirement for additional protection.
	Montane Woodland Creation	Geological features / water bodies and rivers/ sense of remoteness		Managing deer populations will encourage natural regen of native species on side slopes of the Cairngorms Massif. This will be left to natural processes. No active management or respacing will be included. There may be a gradual expansion in these areas, environmental conditions will determine its spread, minimising impact on sense of remoteness

Note that “infill planting” will only occur where natural regeneration fails to occur and the commitment to “no deer fencing”.



So how was this allowed to happen?

As well as being inconsistent with the FLS plan, the deer fencing presents a direct threat to the capercaillie which the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) is trying to save from extinction for the second time. While wooden batons are better than plastic marking and both help reduce the

number of capercaillie garotting themselves on fences, the surest way to protect capercaillie is to avoid fencing entirely. The removal of the McAlpine plantation should have presented an opportunity to extend capercaillie habitat but instead has created another death trap. It is easier, however, for the CNPA to blame outdoor recreation for the decline of capercaillie than challenge FLS.

Part of the explanation for the enclosure may lie in the paper on Deer Management Information ([see here](#)) that forms part of the land-management plan. This reveals FLS are having trouble finding contractors prepared to take on deer management in the forest, including Cairngorms Connect, for the price they are offering. There are also problems because the deer numbers in Glen Einich, which is still owned by Rothiemurchus, are far too high and these descend into the Glenmore Forest in winter. This is undermining the draft Land Management Plan which states:

“Whole Plan- Restocking will be mostly by natural regeneration which will be encouraged through scarification. There will be trials of direct seeding in the MacAlpine plantation and transplanting of Scots pine regeneration in to clearfell sites. Seed source planting of native broadleaves will be undertaken where necessary and these areas will be targeted for deer control to ensure successful establishment.”

It is possible therefore that someone decided that the seeding trials in the McAlpine plantation would not work because of the deer numbers and has resorted to the standard forest practice of planting trees in plastic tree shelters and behind fences:

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The use of plastic tree shelters is also contrary to the draft plan which makes no mention of their use but states:

“Where natural regeneration fails to occur infill planting with native species will be carried out – linear rows of planting should be avoided to allow for a natural forest to establish”.

The felling of the McAlpine plantation has been so recent that there has been no time to tell whether Scots pine would re-seed here. Moreover, the planting has been done in linear rows, the opposite to what was specified.

I entered one of the enclosures to take a look at what had been planted and how the trees were doing. There were tiny pine saplings – one year’s growth – in some of the tree shelters but my quick reckoning was that one in three lacked any tree:



Some tree shelters were completely empty, in others such as here, plants like cowberry had already overwhelmed the tiny pine saplings

Planting trees in plastic shelters is an expensive and not particularly effective way to extend woodland, even before you take account of their carbon impact and the pollution caused by plastic entering the natural environment. FLS was right to announce in January that it had decided to stop using them. Having successfully enabled the native pine woods in Glen More to regenerate naturally for over 40 years without using such shelters, it is stranger that they resorted to them last year. One wonders whether the CNPA and Cairngorms Connect were aware of this and, if so, did they object?



There were lodgepole saplings through the enclosure – note the piles of deadwood behind

The best explanation I can think of for the use of these rows of tree tubes is that someone decided that any naturally regenerated Scots pine would be likely to be overwhelmed by the regeneration of lodgepole pine and needed to be given a head start.

Seed from lodgepole pine is clearly regenerating naturally both within and outwith the enclosures:



But the answer to this problem is not plastic tree shelters, it is weeding out the non-native species like lodgepole pine that will impact on the ability of the native pine wood to re-establish itself here.

Weeding, however, requires money and the employment of a local forester to keep removing the lodgepole pine for as long as necessary. Unfortunately, there was other evidence to show FLS does not have the funds to manage their land properly: the draft plan contains a map on the ecological value of deadwood ([see here](#)) which records the lodgepole in the McAlpine plantation as having low potential. So why leave so much low value deadwood within the enclosures where it will shade out vegetation growth and hinder natural regeneration? The most likely explanation is cost.

Sixty years after the decisions that have caused the current problems in the McAlpine plantation, FLS is making a new set of mistakes. These are likely to have environmental and financial costs far into the future. Instead of treating the Glen More forest like an industrial unit, FLS need to start following the same principles as the more progressive members of Cairngorm Connect otherwise they risk bringing that organisation into disrepute. It's time the CNPA empowered their staff to intervene.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. forestry
3. Forestry and Land Scotland
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