

Nature targets, peatland restoration and ongoing muirburn – Pitmain, yet again!

Description



Smoke from muirburn drifting south from an area – possibly Creag an Loin – just north of the village of Newtonmore on 28th March viewed from Ruthven Barracks.

On Tuesday NatureScot launched its new corporate plan 2022-26 ([see here](#)) under the guise of what it described as “an ambitious new plan for nature” ([see here](#)). The 16 page document commits NatureScot to delivering the Scottish Government’s recently adopted targets that 30% of Scotland’s lands and seas should be protected by 2030 and 10% “highly protected” to help address the climate and nature emergencies.

Having stated that “*the old strategy of protecting the best of our nature in legally defined protected areas has been insufficient*” – 1,011,000 hectares or 12.6% of Scotland’s land area” is currently designated as a Site of Scientific Interest ([see here](#)) – NatureScot fails to explain:

- what is meant by “protected” or “highly protected”;
- the implications for the 70% of Scotland’s land or seas that will remain unprotected;
- or what they – as the agency that has now had statutory responsibility for protecting nature for three decades – will now do differently.

The problem with NatureScot’s latest packaging of its approach to land-management is illustrated by

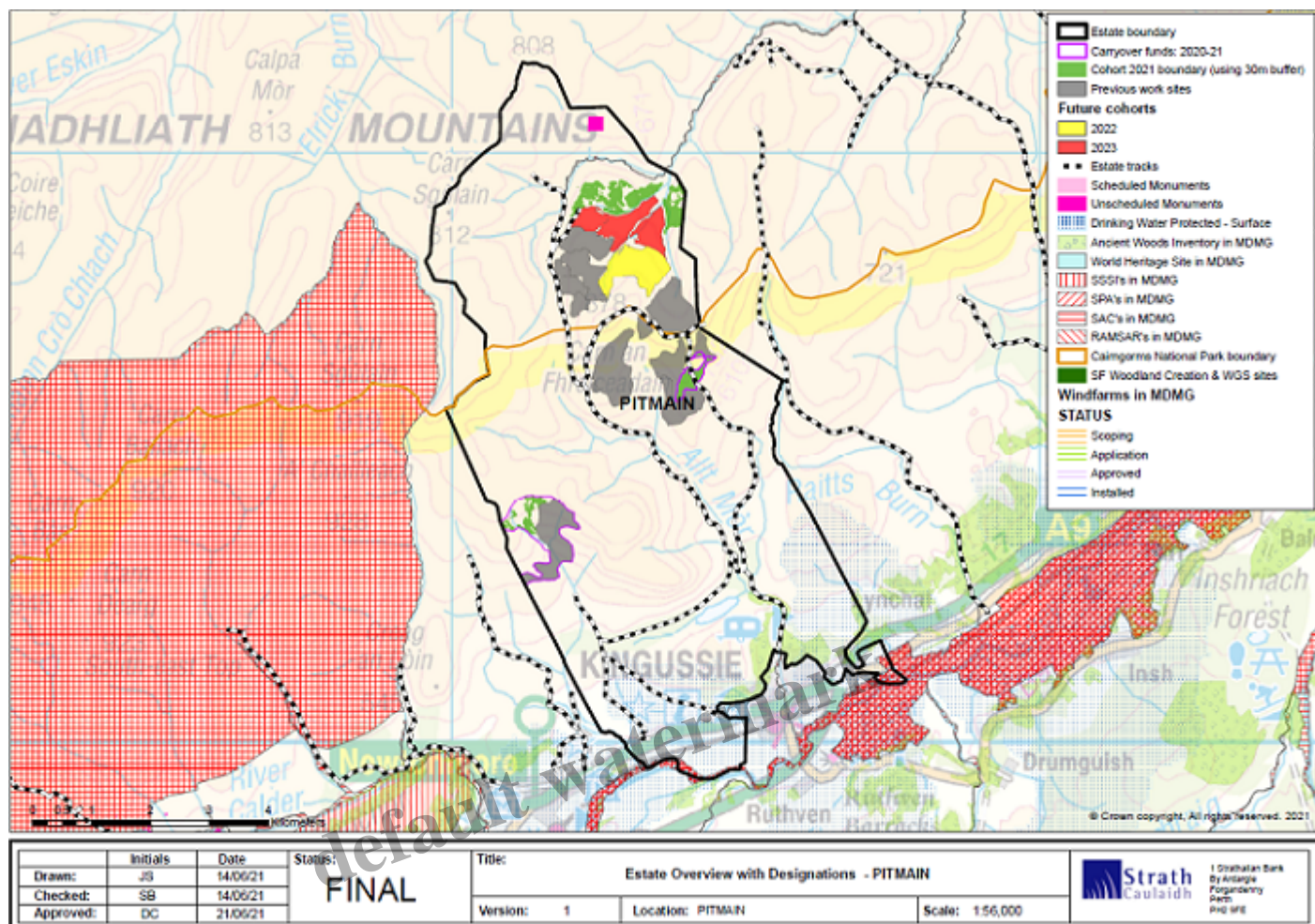
these recent photos of muirburn on the Glen Banchor and Pitmain Estate in the Cairngorms National Park.



View west from Creag Bheag, above Kingussie, 29th March. The muirburn is in the same area as the previous photograph but in a more easterly airflow the smoke is collecting as fog by Creag Dubh west of Newtonmore.

While the destructive impact of deer overgrazing on the natural environment is mentioned in NatureScot's corporate plan, muirburn is not: that is despite a new commitment to "substantially exceed Scotland's goal of 250,000 ha of restored peatland by 2030". It appears that NatureScot is continuing with their current approach where they fund estates to restore peatland to lock up carbon in some areas while turning a blind eye to the burning of peat and peaty soils in others. As RSPB argued last year ([see here](#)) that risks Scotland's carbon targets going up in smoke

At Pitmain and Glen Banchor NatureScot has been funding the estate to restore damaged peatland since 2020 and has committed to paying for further work until 2023:



Peatland Restoration projects now require “prior approval” through the planning system which is how information about plans to restore peatland on Pitmain have become public. Map credit Highland Council planning portal.

Meantime, as the photos shows, muirburn on other parts of the estate continues and indeed appears to be intensifying. While in the National Park, under an agreement between NatureScot and the Cairngorms National Park Authority, while the CNPA funds peatland restoration projects in the central Cairngorms, NatureScot retains responsibility for funding projects in the Monadhliath which it delivers through the Strath Caulaidh consultancy. NatureScot therefore holds primary responsibility for ensuring Scottish Government peatland restoration monies are well spent on Glen Banchora and Pitmain and neighbouring estates.

The Glen Banchor and Pitmain Estate is owned by Majid Jafar, the Chief Executive of Crescent Petroleum, which is apparently the Middle East's oldest privately owned gas and oil company, and like other fossil fuel companies bears a high degree of responsibility for the climate crisis. Instead of the polluter paying, NatureScot appears to be happily paying the polluter to restore part of their land while carrying on destroying the rest regardless.

Twenty years ago when I was on the SNH Board, as NatureScot was then called, there was much talk about the need for joined up thinking and "cross compliance", i.e that to receive public grant landowners should be expected to meet certain requirement across their entire landholdings. The Board as it was then failed to implement those ideas – mea culpa – but now they are not even mentioned and appear completely off NatureScot's agenda. As a consequence, they will continue to fail.

Far from restoring nature, NatureScot's latest plan should be seen as a gift to the owners of Scotland's sporting estates who will no doubt be delighted that muirburn is off the agenda and the vague talk of the need for deer to be in balance with nature: the message is that as long as sporting estates agree to protect 30% of the land, whatever that means and at little or no cost to themselves, they can do what they like on the rest. National Parks might as well not exist.

Postscript

In the absence of action from NatureScot and our National Park Authorities the RSPB has set up a system to report cases of muirburn ([see here](#)). This will provide further evidence to show how much destruction is going on in our National Parks, although if the Scottish Government and NatureScot cared to look they could also view the evidence on Google Earth.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. grouse moors
3. landed estates
4. muirburn
5. NatureScot
6. peatland

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