

Scotland's flawed forestry system that awarded BrewDog c£1m to plant Kinrara (1)

Description



The view up over Kinrara from near Lynwilg, a landscape that tells a tale. The isolated pine high on the hillside, the fenced plantation and the even-aged alder and birch on the lower ground are all a legacy of overgrazing, with more recent muirburn serving to limit native woodland further.

Last month it was reported that Brewdog had been awarded over £1m in grants by Scottish Forestry Scotland as part of its Lost Forest project at Kinrara. The Scottish Forestry website is very hard to use – searches for Brewdog, Kinrara and on its land based database all come up blank – and I have been unable to establish how much has been awarded and for what. The grant, however, appears to be for Phase 1 of Brewdog's Lost Forest plans, which Scottish Forestry consulted on in February. Those plans covered the Strathspey part of the estate, all of which lies within the Cairngorms National Park boundary, and may be slightly different to the final plans Scottish Forestry has agreed.

Whatever the final details the grant award it is, as Dave Morris explained in a letter to the Herald, a misuse of public funds:

VICKY Allan asks some interesting questions about BrewDog's tree planting ambitions in the Cairngorms ("Brewdog: A punk way to save the world. Or green lairds?", The Herald, June 21). But does BrewDog deserve the Scottish Government's huge forestry grant, reportedly in excess of £1 million, to help it in this venture? Perhaps BrewDog is simply stepping aboard a public money gravy train, along with hordes of other corporate interests, investors and anybody else who wants to buy huge chunks of Scotland, without any restrictions. Most of these purchases are linked to forestry grants which encourage plantation forestry and mile upon mile of deer fencing.

Unfortunately, BrewDog's Kinrara estate near Aviemore is entirely the wrong place to spend public money on tree planting. All of its land, covering around 37sq km, is either within the Cairngorms National Park or Monadhliath Wild Land Area. It contains, or is adjacent to, significant remnants of Old Caledonian Pine forest. The heritage quality of this forest is entirely dependent on a very special characteristic – it has been naturally regenerating, through self-seeding, since the last Ice Age, some 9,000 years ago. Planting in such an area will degrade the forest's natural qualities and is unnecessary.

A tree which is established by nature, through self-seeding, will capture far more carbon in its lifetime than a tree which has been raised in a nursery and then planted on the open hillside. Spending public money on deer fencing and planting on Kinrara is an extraordinary way to spend our taxes when nature will provide the essential tree cover for free. All that is needed is to stop burning the heather and reduce the overgrazing by red deer. Kinrara needs more stalkers, not fences.

Perhaps BrewDog, without realising it, has wandered into a situation which has the potential to do significant reputational damage. For decades there has been a cosy relationship between government forestry officials and landowners, many of whom are keen to use forestry for grant and tax purposes. Most of these landowners also want to maintain very high deer numbers for recreational sporting enjoyment. As a

consequence, the natural regeneration and ecological recovery of native woodland, moorland and Arctic alpine vegetation is prevented. Even today few senior officials in Scottish Forestry are prepared to upset this apple cart so that, instead of insisting that deer numbers are reduced to levels that will allow regeneration to take place, they spend millions of pounds of our money every year in planting trees behind deer fences.

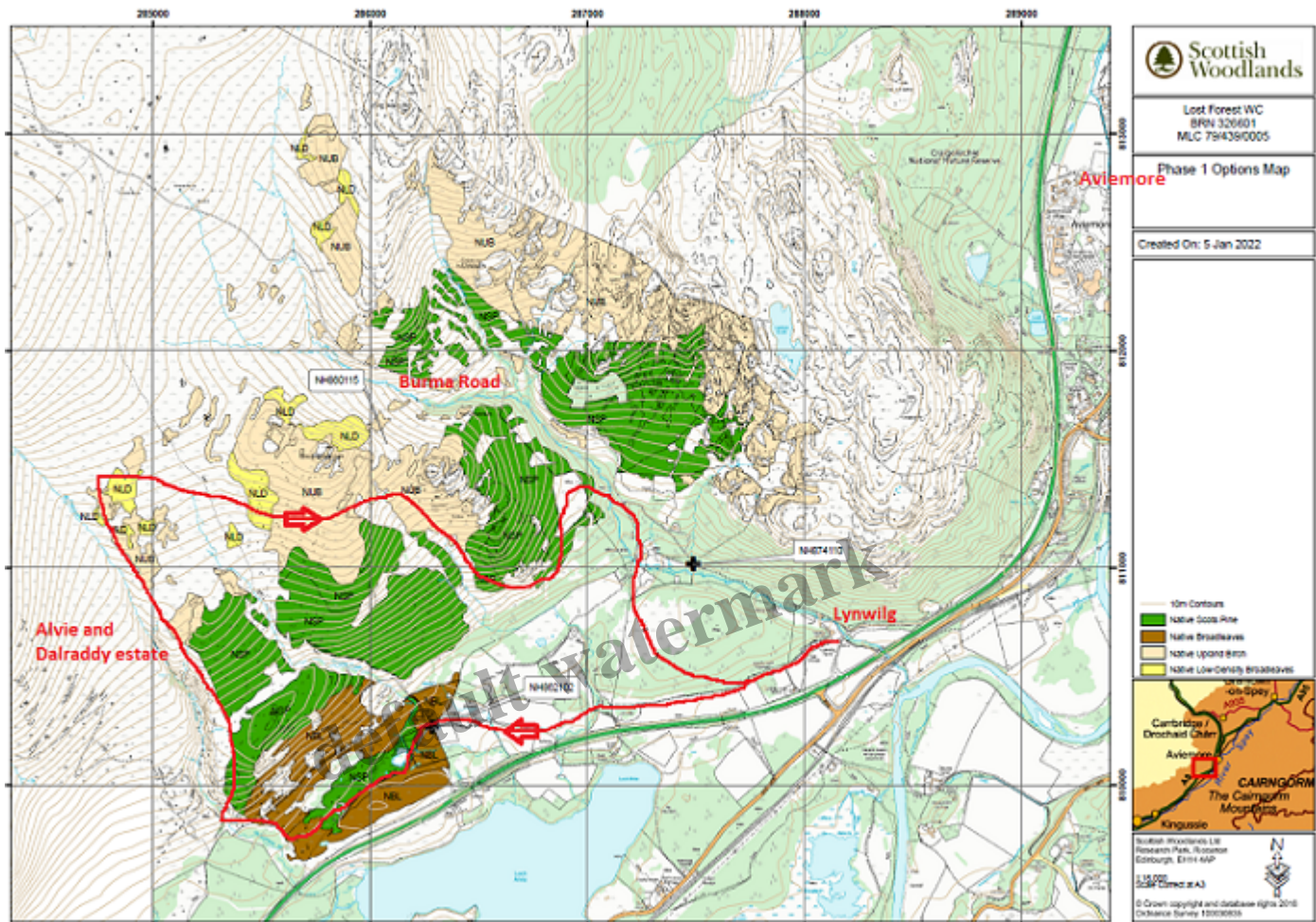
We would get far better value for this money if just a fraction was instead spent on the employment of more deer stalkers. Natural regeneration of native woodland across large tracts of the Highlands and elsewhere would result, delivering massive biodiversity and carbon capture benefits, as well as meeting Scottish Government re-afforestation targets, with ease.

Dave Morris, Kinross.

Letter published in the Herald on 26th June 2022

Dave and I walked round the western part of the area covered by the proposed Phase 1 forestry

scheme in March having previously taken a look at the land along the Burma Rd ([see here](#)). This post builds on the arguments in his Herald letter by showing what we saw on the ground. A second post will provide a more analytical critique of Scottish Woodlands' proposals.



The phase 1 Lost Forest proposals as they appeared in February with the map annotated to show the approximate line of our route and place names referred to in the text

We started our walk at Lynwilg, near the start of the Burma Road which crosses over from Strathspey into the Dulnain, and walked along a track that runs parallel to the A9:



None of this area was included in the Phase 1 proposal map and it is unclear what BrewDog intends to do with it. If BrewDog's aims are to store carbon, grassland can sometimes do this as well as woodland, and the area on the left of the photo might make a nice wildflower meadow, a habitat in short supply in the Cairngorms National Park.



Multi-stemmed oaks are a product of coppicing

The woodland on the right of the track had been planted, consisted mainly of oak and had been coppiced in the past. The lack of any understorey, such as holly or honeysuckle, shows this woodland has been long overgrazed. It is not included within the proposed deer fence and it is unclear whether BrewDog has any plans to reduce the grazing pressure and enable it to regenerate naturally. Not so much a lost forest as a lost opportunity.



Further on the winter storms had wreaked significant damage. Old trees crashing down might not matter so much if all around them new trees were regenerating but this woodland is on its knees. It might make it more palatable if Scottish Forestry, before shedding out loads of public money, required landowners to show they were taking appropriate action to address grazing pressure across all of their land.

BrewDog's intentions, however, for the land outwith the Lost Forest plans are unclear. An excellent article in the Guardian in March ([see here](#)) revealed:

"BrewDog also accepted the claim Kinrara could capture up to 550,000 tonnes of CO₂ a year was wrong. The correct figure was up to 1m tonnes over 100 years, it said.

Early promotions for the Lost Forest suggested each can or pack of Lost Lager sold would fund a tree at Kinrara. A recent advert on BrewDog's online store on Amazon stated "for every pack we plant a tree in the BrewDog Lost Forest". A BrewDog tweet offering free packs of Lost Lager in January 2021, which has been taken down, included a film about the Lost Forest under the wording "we'll plant a tree in our forest" for every pack given away.

The company denies it intended to claim a tree would be planted at Kinrara for every sale of Lost Lager; it told the Guardian that promotion was linked to an Eden Project forest it supports in

Madagascar. It changed its Amazon advert last week after it was flagged by the Guardian and promised to amend the film claiming Kinrara was 50 sq km in size.

BrewDog said the vast bulk of the Lost Forest's overall costs would be met by the company."

If BrewDog does have plans for this area by the A9, which don't involve forestry grants, it's time they went public.



Above the deciduous woodland, in an area that was included in the Lost Forest grant application, is a scattering of old pine trees which have survived extensive muirburn. Set aside the problem of overgrazing, native woodland never had a chance over much of Kinrara when it was managed as a grouse moor. The most positive aspect of BrewDog's management of Kinrara to date is that it has stopped that.



Abandoned trap

Indeed there were other signs that BrewDog has stopped managing the land for sporting purposes, a significant change for the better as far as wildlife is concerned.



Among the devastation caused by muirburn were areas where trees had been planted by the previous owners, most probably with grant assistance from Scottish Forestry. These were also certain planted to provide cover for game birds such as pheasant, not to benefit nature more generally. The plastic tree tubes appear a later addition but probably precede BrewDog's purchase of the estate. If, however, BrewDog really cares about the natural environment at Kinrara they should now be removing all this plastic. Plastic is oil derived, not planet punk.



As with many other sporting estates in Strathspey, we passed pools which had been excavated to provide opportunities to shoot wildfowl. With sport shooting apparently abandoned, these could now be left to develop into wilder wetland habitats. It is likely that, if left alone, much of the flat area around would develop into bog, the most effective medium term of extracting carbon from the atmosphere which is what BrewDog claims it wants to do. But instead this flat area has been included in the Lost Forest's Phase I proposals and is likely to be planted with a mixture of Scots Pine and broadleaves.



Burnt crag. Most of the mosses and lichens that covered this rocky outcrop have been scorched off by fire leaving the rock clean and pale.

Above, the devastation is shocking. Normally, crags provide a refuge for trees but not so here. The isolated birch, which have got away despite grazing pressure, suggest this crag might have been covered with trees if it were not for the muirburn.



A closer view of the scorched crag from higher up

BrewDog, not shy when it comes to publicity, could have made far more about having put a stop to this scorched earth policy but so far appear to have said nothing. Perhaps they are more traditional than they appear and don't want to ruffle the feathers of their neighbouring landowners?



As we approached the neighbouring estate, Dalraddy and Alvie, over moorland that is to be planted, a stock fence ran up the hill. Under the Lost Forest proposals, it appears this fence will be replaced by a deer fence paid for by Scottish Forestry grant.



No sooner had we started up the fence than we came across a juniper sprouting out the heather, an early indication that there are plenty of native trees waiting to emerge from the former grouse moor if only they were given the chance.



Looking back to Lynwilg and the low-lying area we had walked along, Loch Alvie to the right

Although the foreground looks tree-less from a distance, if you got down on your knees for a much closer look, you would find seedlings among the heather and bracken.



Note the muirburn on either side of the fenceline

Slightly higher up the Allt Chrìochaidh, which runs between the Alvie and Kinrara estates, where it became a steep sided gorge inaccessible to deer or sheep there was a mini-forest, with both native and non-native trees. This provided another seed source and, as soon as we started looking among the heather, we found plenty of young pine.



Looking north east from above the gorge towards an isolated stand of old pine

This area was earmarked on the indicative Scottish Woodlands map for planting Scots Pine. There was no justification for this as the trees are already there and with muirburn terminated half the problem has been solved. The problem is and was that as soon as the pine seedlings emerge from the heather they are browsed to destruction. But why just apply for a grant to put in a fence when you can also received lots of money to plant trees?



At least BrewDog does not appear to want to plant this area of bog, which appears as a tree-free strip in the Scottish Woodlands map. But it is proposing to plant the land on either side by turning over the peaty soils and planting trees on the resulting mounds, 1,600 per hectare is what was proposed here. That will destroy soils and release carbon into the atmosphere.



Pine saplings among the heather

If instead BrewDog decided to manage this land like Glen Feshie and bring deer numbers down to two per square kilometre, much of the Lost Forest Phase I area could be covered with trees in 20 years without any further human intervention.



The fieldsports landscape legacy – looking down over muirburn and the pools created for wildfowl shooting to Loch Alvie and the southern part of Kinrara that was purchased by Wildland Ltd

Ironically, around the time Scottish Forestry agreed to shell out c£1m to BrewDog for fences and planting, they announced they were providing grant to Wildland Ltd, who manage Glen Feshie, to promote woodland expansion by natural regeneration ([see here](#)). What is the justification for the very different approach at Kinrara? And why does BrewDog not learn from Wildland Ltd?



The view over Lynwilg to the northern corries – a wooded landscape with plenty of seed source nearby to add to that that is already in the heather waiting for its chance.

I could show a lot more photos but they would illustrate the same simple points. The extent of the destruction caused by muirburn has been extensive but now that has stopped the best way BrewDog could lock up carbon without releasing more into the atmosphere is to reduce grazing pressure and let nature get on with the job. As Dave Morris said in his letter, instead of forestry consultants based in Edinburgh, BrewDog should be employing deer stalkers who live locally.



The view over to the Burma Rd, popular with mountain bikers and hillwalkers, near the end of our walk but an area we had looked at previously and which illustrates all the same issues.

The only planting that in my view might be justified on the Strathspey side of Kinrara are “missing” species but those are not the focus of the Lost Forest Plan and, because of all the overgrazing and muirburn, no-one can know what has survived and what has not until the land has been given an opportunity to regenerate.



Another area earmarked for the planting of Scots Pine where we saw patches littered with pine cone

What needs to happen

BrewDog has to its credit stopped muirburn at Kinrara but risks undermining the benefits that will bring with its Lost Forest scheme, which will do little to reduce deer numbers and is dependent on deer fencing and planting paid for by the public.

Sadly the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has failed to address the issues of muirburn, overgrazing and inappropriate planting behind deer fences since its creation 20 years ago. While it has now adopted a policy presumption in favour of the natural regeneration of native woodland, the credibility of that policy will be undermined if the Lost Forest proposals go ahead.

The underlying explanation for both of these failures is money. It is Scottish Forestry's grant schemes which more than anything else determines what happens on the ground and, until these are reformed, even supposedly alternative landowners like BrewDog will chase the money. Meantime the public – as I will show in my next post on Kinrara – are almost powerless to influence what happens on the ground, whatever the Scottish Government and the CNPA's ostensible policy objectives.

Postscript

An article in the Herald on 2nd July revealed that species rich grassland has been declining at a rate of 2% a year in the Cairngorms National Park since 2006/07. A good reason, one might have thought, for BrewDog, to restore wildflower meadows at Kinrara as well as plant trees.

Category

1. Cairngorms

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Author

nickkempe

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