

Sheep need to be on the agenda of our National Parks â?? the example of Glen Shee

Description



Partially concealed by the shadow but on Sunday there were hundreds of sheep on the flood plain in Glen Shee between the forest fence in the middle ground and the plantation behind

I really value the comments readers make on parkswatch posts and this week there has been an interesting debate on sheep. The first reader, rightly pointed out that it is not just deer but also sheep that prevent woodland regenerating naturally. The second comment, from Tom Colville, is worth quoting in full:

â??The reason we DO need a lot of sheep , raised within enclosures [my emphasis] appears to be completely passing this generation by. This must be rectified. Each week the media report the science confirming the vast quality of plastics and fibre filaments that are now all pervasive across the

ecosystem [for Ferret article on microplastic pollution of our seas this week ([see here](#))]. Plastic filaments in the soil seeping into ground water and river systems, in fish, and crustaceans and lining the stomachs and intestines of every living thing. Plenty remarks are to be found on this blog to condemn plastic tree protection tubes and the many plastic byproducts that cannot be recycled, or re-purposed. Forensic science relies on microscopic plastic fibres from clothing that fall off every moment, to clear up crime. More fibres flow out into sewage treatment works, and compromise the processes during every wash cycle.

Wool can be the solution, just as it always used to be. It is of course not so durable, but it is endlessly replaceable, and it does biodegrade. Industrialists should be seeking new ways to use it, not only for textiles but incorporated back into fertilisers and soil conditioners, and also in place of foam plastics and mineral wools for building insulation. The vital thing here is to husband sheep within defined enclosures and maybe not so much where attempts are being made to get forests to become re-established across the over drained and burnt back and barren ecological deserts which blight so many highland grouse moors.

This, I believe, is a very strong argument to which I would add two points. The first is that the enclosures need to be in the right place and should not encroach on wild land or nature reserves where we should be allowing naturally processes to predominate i.e there should areas where no farming or forestry takes place. The second is that within enclosures sheep can have a positive impact on nature and biodiversity. They can help, for example, maintain the flower rich meadows which are steadily being lost from the Cairngorms, so long as the grazing is carefully controlled.

By lucky timing, the sheer number of sheep I witnessed driving through Glen Shee last weekend on either side of the five mile stretch of the A93 from below the Carn Aosda to Auchallater prompted me to take some photos which help illustrate the issues.



In some places they were concentrated into flocks (top photo) in others more scattered, but almost everywhere you looked there were sheep.



There were sheep grazing tfrom just by the road to the skyline.



Together with the extensive muirburn, no tree has a chance. The purpose of this muirburn could be to promote grasses for sheep rather than young heather for grouse or a mixture of the two. One would hope that the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) knows the answer and understands what is driving the Invercauld estate, which owns the land, to allow the land to be used in this way.



Note the remains of a dyke running up the hillside just right of centre

There were signs in the landscape to show that at one time enclosures were used to manage sheep in Glen Shee.



View of ruined stone dykes from the car between Spittal of Glen Shee and the ski centre

This was more obvious in Glen Beag, south of the Cairnwell, where old stone dykes criss-cross the hillside. Instead of the extensive network of stone dykes being used to manage sheep, to keep them in as well as out, fences are now mainly used to keep sheep out. An example is the stock fence in the photo, designed to prevent sheep wandering onto the A93.



Hence too, the postage stamp planting along the Cluanie Water in Glen Shee, paid for by the public via the Pearls in Peril project ([see here](#)).



Deer fence in the foreground with stock fencing on either side of the Cluanie water behind.

A complex network of fences exists on parts of the lower ground in Glen Shee but most of it appears designed to keep sheep and deer out of woodland planting rather than control the movement of sheep more generally. I did not think to check if the strip of land being grazed by sheep in this photo was enclosed at either end or if it serves as a corridor between plantings along the flood plain.

If enclosed, it would provide an illustration of how sheep should be managed in the National Park: kept in places with lush grazing rather than being allowed to wander all over the open hillside. The challenge would then be to determine the best balance between the number of sheep and how long they remain in each area of enclosed land, to make the most of the fodder and produce the wool we need while avoiding damage by overgrazing.

Such a grazing regime would require proactive management and more people to be employed as shepherds.



The draft National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP), approved by the CNPA board in June, includes just one reference to sheep and none to shepherds.

Policy A3 commits the CNPA to:

Enhance the resilience of habitats, species and land use to climate change, pest and disease risks. Ensure that the integrity of designated sites is maintained, with a particular focus on:

a)

f) Reducing red deer and other herbivore (roe deer, fallow deer, sheep and hare) numbers where needed across the National Park to enable woodlands to expand, heather loss to be reversed, peatlands to recover and wider biodiversity and landscape enhancement to take place.

The NPPP gives no consideration to the role that sheep could play in reducing carbon emissions and pollution, saving the disappearing meadows in the Cairngorms or providing rural employment.

At least the CNPA NPPP gives sheep a mention. The word sheep does not appear once in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority NPPP 2018-23, despite sheep farming being far more extensive than in the Cairngorms and it being the second most important form of land-use, after forestry, in the National Park!

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation

3. fencing
4. LLTNPA
5. natural environment
6. plastic
7. sheep

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