

Why we need to abolish forestry grants in their current form – the lessons from the Cairngorms

Description



Looking over regenerating Caledonian forest in Glen Quoich, on Mar Lodge, to muir burnt Morrone J 2022.

Writing in the magazine British Wildlife in August 2018 David Hetherington, ecologist with the Cairngorms National Park Authority, explained the importance of natural regeneration in expanding the existing remnants of the Old Caledonian pine forests in the Cairngorms. Natural regeneration is the key defining character of these forests, demonstrating that they are descended directly from the ancient forests which were established in Scotland following the last Ice Age, 9,000 years ago. Many scientific studies have highlighted their value, distinguishing the remnants of these forests from the planted Scots pine woodlands of more recent times.

But Hetherington explained that there was a problem in meeting the CNPA's ambition and this problem was caused by the grant schemes put in place by successive governments to encourage forest expansion which were: "predicated on the installation of deer fencing and the planting of nursery-grown stock – a relatively expensive process reflected in high grant payments. Hetherington compared this to landscape reforestation in Norway where woodland expansion had been achieved "cost free" across large tracts of western Norway in response to reduced grazing pressure. No deer fencing and no planting was needed in this part of Norway, demonstrating that over large tracts of Scotland the same could be achieved by simply reducing the grazing pressure from red deer, given the political will.

This post is the first of three which demonstrates how the Scottish Government is wasting £millions of public money through the existing forestry grant system in the Cairngorms and elsewhere. Other organisations, like the voluntary body Trees for Life, reinforce this system by also fencing and planting when they and their neighbours should instead be securing woodland expansion, at a landscape scale, by robust culling of deer without fencing.

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Ordan Shios woodland creation scheme Ralia Estate, designed by Scottish Woodlands using Scottish Rural Development Programme funds. Such schemes are both expensive and destructive.

Add to this the RSPB who insist on planting willows in the heart of the wildest part of the Cairngorms and it becomes obvious that a significant change in land use policy and practice is needed in Scotland, along with the financial incentives that currently underpin the wrong sort of forestry. Proper control of red deer numbers is central to resolving these problems but past evidence suggests that our politicians have no idea how to do this.

In Sept 2018 I wrote to Peter Argyle, then Convener of the CNPA, with a copy to all his Board members, as follows:

Dear Peter,

I have read the papers on the Forest Management Strategy which have been prepared for the Board meeting on 28 September and would like to bring to your attention one particular issue that concerns me. Overall I think this is an excellent strategy document which accurately reflects the heritage, land management and public enjoyment values for which the Cairngorms are famous. Those involved in its preparation are to be congratulated for the detailed analysis of the issues under consideration and for the proposed policies that arise from that analysis.

My main concern is that I do not think that a key part of the Forest Strategy, namely the aspirations for native woodland expansion, can be met in the way intended by the CNPA. These aspirations cannot be delivered effectively because of existing Forestry Commission Scotland grant aid policy. The main evidence for this comes from the Park's own ecologist, David Hetherington, in a recently published paper ("Conservation of mountain woodland in the Cairngorms National Park", British Wildlife, August 2018). I attach a copy. On page 397 is an explanation of the application of FCS grant aid policies in the Cairngorms followed by the statement that "woodland creation using the enhanced funding of the Forestry Grant Scheme is largely predicated on the installation of deer fencing and the planting of nursery-grown stock".

This Forestry Grant Scheme is the only source of funding mentioned in the CNPA Forestry Strategy and is the primary means of financial support available to private landowners who have decided to support the Forest Strategy aspirations. As most landowners will only consider native woodland expansion if public funds are available to support such action, the overwhelming majority are likely to want to fence and plant in order to satisfy FCS grant aid requirements. This will be directly contrary to the CNPA aspirations in those areas of the Park where it wants to "encourage natural regeneration of native forests" (Strategic Objective No.4) and where it seeks to minimise the use of deer fencing in sensitive areas (Policy Guidance – woodland creation). While the FCS grant aid requirements may be appropriate in large parts of the target areas for forest expansion, notably where planting is a primary method of woodland establishment, they are not appropriate over perhaps even larger parts of the Park, especially where native woodland remnants remain and are capable of expansion through natural regeneration.

Hetherington's paper also points to the serious cost implications of the FCS approach and compares the Scottish situation with Norwegian experience, describing the fencing and planting option as "a relatively expensive process reflected in high grant payments, such as £3,600 per hectare for the Native Scots Pine or Native Broadleaves options, plus £9.90 per metre of deer fence". In Norway, by contrast, Hetherington explains that landscape-scale reforestation has been achieved "cost free" in response to reduced grazing pressure. These remarks clearly point to a situation which is likely to give considerable concern to those responsible for approving public funding expenditure in the Park. Using the FCS approach over extensive areas would imply very poor value for money outcomes, irrespective of other concerns relating to heritage and public enjoyment values.

My own experience in dealing with FCS schemes in the Cairngorms is similar to the problems described by Hetherington – efforts to persuade landowners to prioritise natural regeneration when expanding the ancient woodlands have been too often compromised by the fencing and planting constraints of FCS grant aid. And from the Norway perspective, from many journeys through that country, I would say it is obvious, if we are serious about landscape scale ecological restoration in the Cairngorms, then the absolute priority is the need to cut down grazing pressures in and around our native woodland remnants, without any requirement for fencing and

planting.

So I hope your Board members, at their meeting this week, will at least recognise that there is a really serious problem here with the way in which the FCS Grant Schemes are likely to be applied in the Cairngorms in response to the CNPA's Forest Strategy. A way needs to be found to restrict the application of FCS grant aid so that it is only available in areas of the Cairngorms where ancient woodlands are absent. Where such woodlands are present new financial support mechanisms are needed to encourage private owners to promote their natural regeneration. Such support could come through other public bodies such as Scottish Natural Heritage, local authorities or the CNPA itself, with a focus on reducing grazing pressures. I hope the Board will give its attention to the need to make such changes as soon as possible. If I can be of any further assistance on this matter please let me know.

I have copied this email to Grant Moir and the relevant CNPA staff and also to all Board members whose email addresses appear on the CNPA website. I will ask Alix Harkness to copy my email on to those email addresses that are not on the website.

*All the best
Dave*

So far, over 4 years later, I have received no reply to this communication, but I did hear that, at the subsequent Board meeting, one member asked "what are we going to do about Dave Morris's letter".

"Nothing" would appear to be the answer.



BrewDog should be naturally regenerating trees, not planting.

Today we can see the consequences of such non CNPA action. BrewDog, the craft brewing company, have been awarded in excess of £1million, from Scottish Forestry (SF), to fence and plant a large part of their Kinrara estate, near Aviemore. This ludicrous scheme has been approved despite plenty of representation to SF and BrewDog's advisers to explain that, as Kinrara is adjacent to one of the best remnants of the Old Caledonian forest, the Dulnain native pinewood, fencing and planting is completely unnecessary. The essence of this advice was that, so long as no further heather burning took place and effective deer culling measures were carried out, then natural regeneration of trees, shrubs, mosses and lichens etc would be extensive, throughout the estate.



Scattered Scots pine on burned slope viewed from Burma Rd, Kinrara, September 2022

Further south in Badenoch Standard Life Investments Property Income Trust have bought a large part of Ralia estate near Newtonmore ([see here](#)), rejoicing in the prospect that the taxpayer will be generously footing a good part of the bill. In this case, representations against the new deer fencing that was proposed in the original plans appears to may have had some impact.. Most of the adjacent ground is owned by Anders Polvsen and his Wildland company. They have demonstrated in Glen Feshie, Gaick and Tromie how to restore natural forest ecosystems without deer fencing and planting. Clearly no fencing should ever have been considered along the boundary between the two estates and we understand this may now have been removed from the plans, but the consultants are still proposing to use machines to plant trees. SLIPIT should simply stop burning the moorland, block all the artificial drains in the wet areas and cull the deer, following the example of their neighbours.



New gate on the Wade Military Road on Ralia. SLIPIT apparently want this gate to prevent vehicles using the bridge but if so they need to erect it well away from the bridge further along the track. Photo Credit Anne MacIntyre.

Sadly SLIPIT's most ostensible action so far has been to damage an ancient Wade Bridge by a fence and gate erected in the wrong location while they have recently published hill track development proposals which appear to be completely unnecessary.

In the following posts I will explain why the existing Scottish forestry grant system should be terminated asap and a completely new type of financial incentive put in place to support tree planting in the lowlands rather than the uplands and why public money is no longer needed to support planting in the uplands.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA

2. conservation
3. Deer
4. forestry
5. scottish forestry
6. Scottish Government

Date Created

December 27, 2022

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