

Lessons from France's National Parks – forest management and the natural regeneration of woodland

Description



Looking towards Rimplas from the Col St Martin in the Mercantour National Park

{NB this post has been corrected following a comment below}

The GR5/52 from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean is about 650km long and crosses through two of France's National Parks, the Vanoise and the Mercantour (and a number of other protected areas). Much of the lower parts of the route go through forest and I mean "forest", not small patches of woodland. This is a reflection of the fact that trees cover c31% of the land in France, compared to less than 20% in Scotland, and a significant proportion of those trees are in the mountains.



Looking up the upper part of the Maurienne (right), the longest alpine valley in France, which form part of the peripheral zone around the Vanoise National Park

Unlike Scotland, much of this forest has developed and been managed through natural regeneration not planting. Over the 650km I saw not see a single deer fence, not a single plastic tree shelter and only one example (outside of gardens) of where trees had recently been planted.



Tree planting below the Col de Thures descending to Nevache. Note the naturally regenerating larch on the right of the photo.

The trees that had been planted in that case had been “protected” by wire shelters, presumably intended to protect saplings against grazing animals. As in Scotland, where grazing levels are low, it was difficult to see the point as nature was doing the job. Such waste of human effort and resources (the fabrication of wire releases significant amounts of carbon into the atmosphere) is, however, the exception in France not the rule.



Hornbeam in the Forêt d'Alberia south of Sospel on the GR52 – again not in a National Park

I did come across several examples of trees that had clearly been planted in the not too distant past for specific purposes (hazel and sweet chestnut as well as the hornbeam above) but all of these comprised relatively small areas within the wider forest.

The use of natural regeneration as the primary means of woodland expansion and renewal in France is not just a matter of tradition and culture, the way forestry has developed over the last two centuries, but part of state policy as this sign from the office National des Forêts, the French equivalent to Scottish Forestry and Forest and Land Scotland, helped explain:



Sign above Le Boreon in the Mercantour National Park

The way that commercial forestry is managed in the French mountains is that trees are felled when they reach a certain age but they are then replaced by “l’ensemencement naturel” – natural reseedling - which costs nothing. Unlike in Scotland trees are not clear-felled – I saw only one example of this in 650km (sorry no photo) – but selectively felled in order to promote certain species and create a varied age structure



While from a distance and at first sight (top two photos) the Alpine forests – particularly those where the dominant species is the *Epicea*/Norwegian Spruce – may appear as uniform as a Scottish Sitka plantation, they actually contain a wide range of both tree and shrub species. This is a consequence of natural regeneration – tree seed gets everywhere if given the chance (blown by the wind, carried by animals and birds etc) – and difference in soil, the aspect of slope and the spaces created by selective felling. As the sign explains this helps “diversité biologique”



Part of an interpretative sign at Rougios in the peripheral zone to the Mercantour National Park

France was not always like this, as this sign graphically illustrates. By 1820 only about 12% of France was wooded. The response of the French state in 1827 was to pass a law controlling “abusive felling” of trees and grazing of livestock in the forests and there was then a planting programme (see reference in comment below) in response to the denudation of trees from the countryside.

The laws to protect trees and forests was later extended to the Nice region, where the Mercantour National Park is now located, which until the mid-19th century formed part of the Kingdom of Piedmont/Sardinia. Those basic laws have resulted in what is now often called “continuous cover forestry” which in both policy and environmental terms has generally been very successful.

By contrast to France, the UK failed to respond to the decline in woodland cover until after the First World War. It then introduced a forestry regime that was based around plant and fell but which also failed to tackle the issue of grazing animals. The result has been that for most of the last 100 years natural regeneration across Scotland has been extremely limited and now most people wanting to plant a tree in rural areas, including in their own gardens, have to protect it with fencing.



Suburban Alps below Dalmas in the peripheral zone of the Mercantour National Park. Note the wooden fence, designed to mark the boundary of the property not to keep animals out.

There are two main aspects to the way that that grazing in France is controlled in order to enable woodland to regenerate naturally.

The first, referred to above, is that there are controls on where livestock are allowed to graze. Traditionally this has been managed through shepherding but is now greatly assisted by temporary electric fencing which is in use almost everywhere.



Controlled use of fencing south of Roya, in the core zone of the Mercantour National Park

(The question of why any sheep farming continues to be allowed in what is supposed to be the core zone of a National Park is one I will consider in a follow up post).



Note the dung in the foreground and the higher vegetation behind the green line, evidence that the cattle grazing here was closely controlled

Grazing is also allowed in some woodland but again carefully controlled, “micro-managed” if you like. This is in contrast to Scotland where sheep and cattle in the uplands are treated as having as much of a right to roam as humans and there are not even mechanisms to prevent them wandering into what are supposed to be protected areas ([see here](#) for example).

The second way that grazing is controlled in France is through the hunting of wild animals, including most importantly from a natural regeneration perspective, deer. Hunting is managed through a national licensing scheme, which operates at national, regional and local levels and which takes account of the need to control numbers so that woodland can regenerate. Unlike in Scotland, where hunting is an elite “sport” and local people prevented from hunting by strict poaching laws, in France

there are 1.5m people who hold licenses to do so. One needs to look no further to understand why France does not have a deer problem in the way we do.

Discussion

While there are now significant issues with the level of grazing which is taking place in the Vanoise and the Mercantour National Parks – some can be seen in the photos above – which I will consider in further posts, the basic lesson from France is that if you control grazing levels properly, woodland will expand and renew itself through natural regeneration. Moreover in my view the evidence from France shows that natural regeneration has been far more successful than planting in Scotland as a means of expanding woodland cover and has been achieved for far less environmental and financial cost.

If the Scottish Government therefore really wants to expand tree cover in Scotland to absorb carbon and help restore nature the most effective and cheapest way of doing this would be to scrap the current forestry grants system and replace it with new mechanisms to control grazing.

That there is almost no public or political debate in Scotland about this says something about the power of vested interests. The forestry industry and Scottish Forestry, the body responsible for dishing out large sums of public money to private interests, bears much of the responsibility but behind them lies the power of the landowners. It is no coincidence that in Scotland livestock grazing is almost completely uncontrolled and rather than sheep and cattle being fenced in, foresters need to fence those animals out.

Successive Scottish governments over the last seventy years have also allowed stalking estates to increase the number of deer on their land with the result that, even if stock were fenced in, natural regeneration of woodland would be impossible. The fundamental issue here is that unlike in France, the basic assumption of government is that landowners should have a right to manage their land as they wish without state “interference”.

While the management of forests in France shows how over-grazing by large herbivores, both domestic and wild, could be controlled, there are two further land management factors specific to the way land in Scotland is owned and managed for sporting purposes which impact on the ability of woodland to regenerate naturally. The first is muirburn, something that I have not seen in the Alps – but is practised in the French Pyrenees – which incinerates any tree that seeds naturally across large swathes of Scotland. The second is predator persecution, designed to boost grouse numbers artificially, which means that the raptors, foxes, stoats and weasels which otherwise help prevent tree saplings from being consumed by voles and hares are almost absent from much of Scotland. Hence the awful polluting plastic tree tubes that are blighting our countryside.

The underlying lesson from France about woodland policy in Scotland, therefore, is that if the Scottish Government really wants to expand tree cover it needs to reform land-ownership and instigate measures which enable all the factors which preventing trees from regenerating naturally to be properly controlled.

Category

1. Cairngorms

2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. National Parks

Tags

1. forestry
2. natural regeneration
3. overgrazing
4. scottish forestry
5. Scottish Government

Date Created

September 18, 2023

Author

nickkempe

default watermark