

## Natural regeneration versus planting – the contradictions in the Cairngorms and Government

### Description



Image (above): Fixed point photography from NatureScot's Invershie Reserve, showing woodland regeneration between 1973 left and 2023 right. Credit: Ian Sargent from Cairngorms Connect news [\(see here\)](#).

The recent report from Cairngorms Connect [\(see here\)](#), which explained the last 30 years experience of rewilding on the western slopes of the Cairngorms massif, was covered in the Strathspey and Badenoch Herald ("*Fences are "no answer in Forests"*") and attracted two letters in responses from Basil Dunlop and myself – see below. The information provided by Cairngorms Connect, along with the latest forest and ecological studies by universities, research institutes and government scientists, as well as a number of private landowners, has fundamental significance for land use policy in Scotland and the taxpayer funded incentives that support such land use.

Put simply, current policy and incentives are completely out of step with the latest scientific knowledge relating to climate change and biodiversity restoration. And there is little sign at present that any of our politicians even understand the problem, let alone know how to solve it.

Basil Dunlop, a former Chief Forester of Seafield and Strathspey Estates when they owned Abernethy and former Highland Councillor, explains the mistakes made by the RSPB in their management of Abernethy Forest and the mountain slopes above. Following visits by their chief executive, based at RSPB HQ in Bedfordshire, England, the RSPB fundamentally changed the previously agreed policies when they had purchased Abernethy in the mid 1980s, supported by taxpayer funds and other donations.



Ground preparation and an early example of RSPB's planting mistake from Strath Nethy 2014. Note dead sapling.

Consumed by impatience RSPB HQ decided that expansion of the forest by natural regeneration was not quick enough and so a tree planting programme was initiated and still continues today, even into the heart of the massif in Glen Avon. This is completely at odds with the principles first established in

the 1950s as the first conservation measures were applied to the Cairngorms, including the need to manage the central massif with “minimum interference” from human activity. This meant that the primary objective then and now should be to manage deer population levels so that they are part of regenerating ecosystems.

Doing so would ensure that the main part of the Cairngorms massif, the wildest mountain area in the UK, can flourish as a scientific reference site, enjoying the steady regeneration of tree and scrub communities across the full altitudinal range. This then provides an invaluable contrast to other forest and mountain areas where more intensive woodland management techniques, including planting, are followed and can be compared to the environmental baseline provided by the Cairngorms. The RSPB’s continued planting in Abernethy and Glen Avon compromises this objective. The sensible place to do tree and shrub planting is in the intensively managed recreational area of Coire Cas where snow retention and landscape quality would be much improved by such planting.

My own letter to the Strathy deals with the wider picture and explains how tree planting, especially when associated with the cultivation of organic soils, is very questionable when carbon capture is the objective, as seen in the planting currently underway in the land purchased by the global investment company, Abrdn, near Newtonmore. I also make reference, as Basil has done, to the problems associated with the expansion of our ancient Caledonian pine woods and especially the absurd programme of fencing and planting being undertaken by the craft brewing company, BrewDog, on their Kinrara Estate near Aviemore.

Both BrewDog and Abrdn should simply be employing sufficient deer stalkers to maintain deer numbers at levels that permit shrub and tree habitat recovery. Both demonstrate everything that is wrong with the Scottish Government’s forestry grant programme, with Abrdn receiving £2.5 million of taxpayer’s money for their planting programme, while BrewDog have been awarded in excess of £1 million just for phase one of their planting programme. The latest scientific research indicates that both these sites will still be emitting more carbon to the atmosphere than the trees are capturing as we pass 2045, the year when Scotland is supposed to reach net zero.

The answer is to scrap the existing Scottish Forestry grant scheme and replace it with incentives that secure ecological restoration of all uncultivated soils in the uplands, by reducing grazing levels, and to focus tree planting incentives on the lowlands, meeting timber, biodiversity and carbon capture objectives through planting on agricultural land with existing low organic content and areas exposed to landslips in the uplands.

**Natural regeneration of native pinewoods is best way forward – by Basil Dunlop**



Much reproduced photo which appeared in the Strathy under title “Natural regeneration taking Cairngorms Connect land at Glenfeshie”.

I WAS delighted to read the article (Strathy, October 5) based on the report from Cairngorms Connect declaring that there is no need for expensive fencing and planting to re-afforest upland areas – it could be achieved by natural regeneration where there are seed trees.

This is exactly what I and experts including Prof. Chris Smout, Prof Bob Bunce, the late Dr Adam Watson and Dick Balharry, and Dave Morris have been trying in vain to tell the Forestry Commission (now confusingly called Scottish Forestry), Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot), and the Cairngorms National Park Authority, for the last 20 years.

This was the policy of these authorities until this century, when, without explanation or consultation, they reversed previously stated policy to expand ancient woodland by natural means, and allowed the planting of trees in and around designated areas.

This was despite knowing planting causes degradation and breaks the 9,000 year chain of natural evolution.

In 1959 Prof Steven and Dr Carlisle of Aberdeen University had published the findings of their comprehensive research into the remnant Caledonian Pinewoods (CPW) 'The Native Pinewoods of Scotland'. It revealed the location and shocking condition of the few remaining descendants, due to felling, planting, and overgrazing.

This stimulated action by many naturalists, foresters and authorities – notably The Institute of Terrestrial Ecology – and led to major conferences at Coylumbridge (1975) and Culloden (1994) where delegates agreed to take action to protect and expand the remnant CPWs by natural means.

Many official publications on appropriate management and practice guides stressed natural regeneration as the most suitable method of regeneration – which also avoids harmful and expensive ground disturbance from ploughing or mounding.

But this century these protective policies have been ignored even by the authorities who made them – planting and ground disturbance have been allowed, with the RSPB permitted to plant thousands of trees in the Abernethy CPW (even core parts, regeneration and buffer zones) and the hitherto development-free heavily designated Cairngorms above Loch Avon.

Perhaps now ancient woods and the Cairngorms will be properly protected from harmful anthropogenic actions.

There are plenty of upland areas well away from any ancient woods or mature native trees which can be planted to increase Scotland's area of forests.

But in the designated CPWs like Abernethy and the Cairngorms planting must be banned.

Realistic and adequate restocking and expansion areas, must be properly designated and protected by owners as custodians for present and future generations to enjoy.

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## **YOUR VIEWS: Scottish Ministers need to brush up on school biology lessons**

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Letter from Dave Morris, Strathspey and Badenoch Herald, 23rd October 2023



Ground preparation currently taking place on Far Ralia as part of Abrdn’s tree planting scheme. Photo which appeared in the Strathy, credit Dave Morris

Let us hope that the senior management of Brewdog read the Strathy and your headline “Fences are ‘no answer’ in forests” (October 5).

Thirty years of study by the four organisations that comprise Cairngorms Connect has clearly demonstrated that ‘long term co-ordinated deer control, without need for fencing or planting, enables trees to recolonise upland areas at a landscape scale’.

The fundamental question must now be when are Brewdog and the other newly arrived corporate landowners in the Cairngorms, along with the traditional landowners, led by King Charles, going to learn this lesson?

The planting and fencing disaster that is BrewDog’s Kinrara Estate has recently been explained in detail by Nick Kempe in his blog parkswatchscotland ([see here](#)) as senseless, destructive and a misuse of public money.

Supporting all these badly advised landowners is the Scottish Government.

The crux of the problem is the way the SG is dishing out to the old and new lairds huge amounts of public money, to fence and plant, through their Scottish Forestry grant system.

This system, which favours tree planting in preference to natural regeneration of trees, shrubs, wood and moorland habitats, has not been fit for purpose for at least the last 50 years.

Last year I explained to then Scottish Forestry Minister Mairi McAllan that she was wasting millions of public money in the wrong sort of forestry grants, using BrewDog as the latest example of this foolish policy.

BrewDog had just been awarded in excess of £1 million to damage the hill slopes above Aviemore, by fencing, digging and planting. The public money would have been far better spent in employing more stalkers to manage the deer population and allow the hillside to regenerate.

The Minister subsequently appeared to make no effort to question why Scottish Forestry had awarded this grant, despite considerable public opposition.

Even worse, the Scottish Government then awarded a forestry grant of £2.5 million to the global finance company Ayr Property Investment Trust to carry out a similar programme of soil disturbance and planting on their newly acquired Far Ralia estate near Newtonmore.

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Mounding at Far Ralia, photo credit Dave Morris

This land was purchased for £7.5 million by Standard Life before they were absorbed into ABRDN. The digging machines have moved from Kinrara and are now at work on Far Ralia, churning up the ground for planting.

A much better option would have been to follow the example of their Cairngorms Connect neighbours, Wildland Ltd, and simply controlled the deer so that the existing woodland and moorland habitats could expand and regenerate naturally.

Repeated representations to politicians and Scottish Forestry to stop this nonsense are given no proper consideration.

The climate and biodiversity emergency requires a focus for the management of uncultivated landscapes in the Cairngorms to be on the cessation of muirburn and the employment of many more deer stalkers to bring about effective deer management.



The place for planting trees should be on ground already subject to intensive cultivation where the carbon loss through the planting process can be minimised.

Digging and planting semi natural vegetation is leading to carbon loss which will not be compensated for by the growing trees for many decades. By contrast, a naturally regenerating tree will be capturing carbon from day one, with no carbon loss through the planting process.

Scottish Ministers need to learn some basic biology and scrap the current forestry grant system before it is too late.

**Category**

- 1. Cairngorms

**Tags**

- 1. CNPA
- 2. conservation
- 3. natural regeneration
- 4. RSPB
- 5. scottish forestry

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