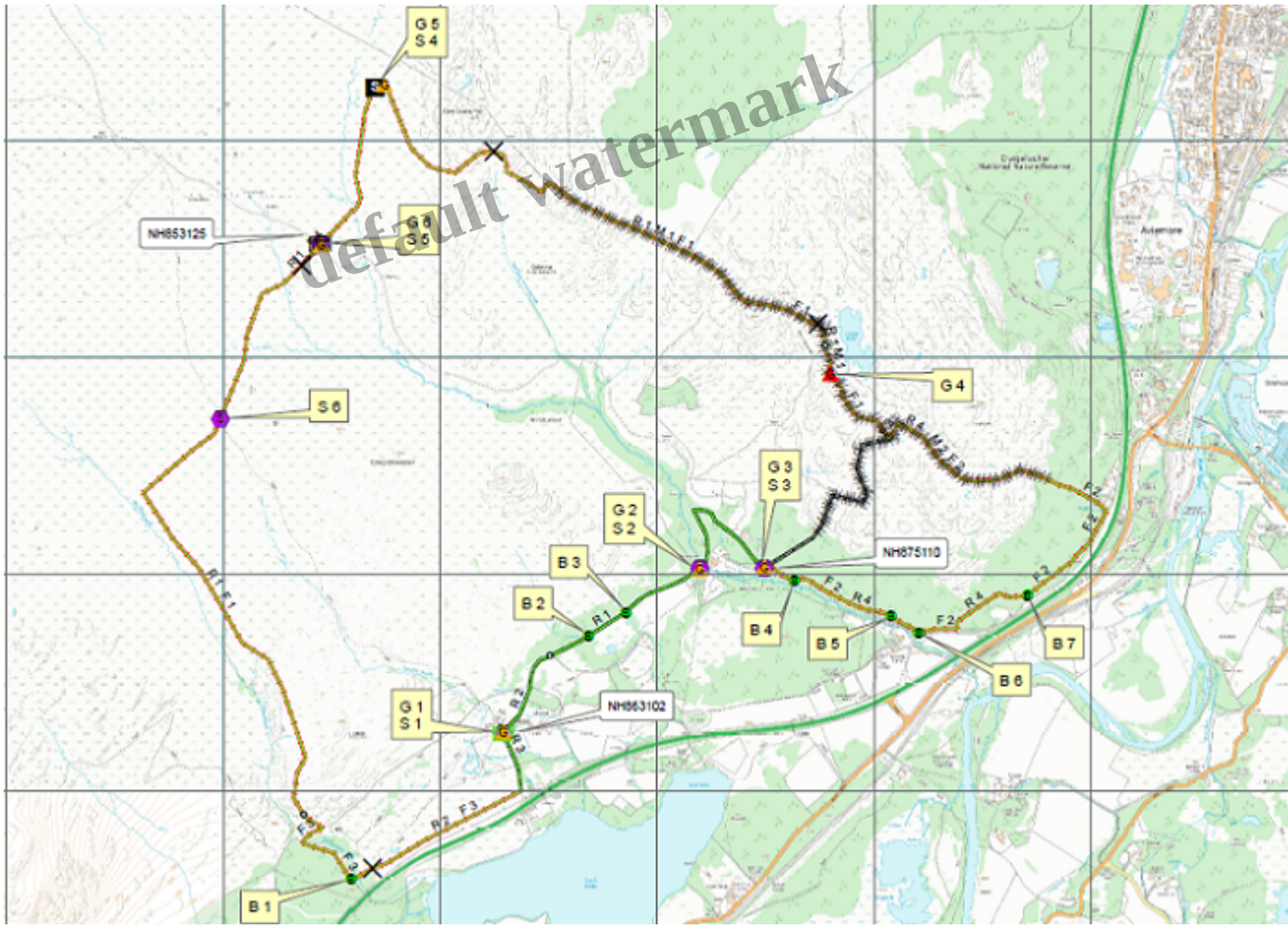
BrewDog’s dead forest in the Cairngorms National Park and the lost recreational experience

Description

Lost Forest boundary fence February 2024 with Craigellachie National Nature Reserve just visible in the middle ground and Aviemore in the distance. Photo credit Parkswatch reader

I am very grateful to all the people who have promoted my post on Sunday (see here) about Scottish Forestry and the tree planting disaster at Kinrara and my apologies that the parkswatch website then crashed. This does not appear to have been due to a cyber attack by defenders of the forestry grants system or even the volume of people trying to access the post but rather a botched attempt by myself to change my wordpress theme and make the typeface darker and easier to read (still not sorted, I have had to manually change the typeface in every para of this post)! Anyway, because of the website crash many people who came to parkswatch for the first time may not have appreciated that I have been documenting what has been going at Kinrara ever since BrewDog bought the estate three years ago (see here). Now seems an good opportunity therefore to add to that record by explaining how BrewDog's planting and the forestry grants scheme has impacted on the experience of visitors and locals alike.

The impact of BrewDog's new deer fencing on access



The boundary fence with crossing points from BrewDog's "capital items" map. G = vehicular gate. S= bike/horse gate. X = stile. B = badger gate. Note how all the badger gates are along the lower part of the enclosure – as if badgers never cross or forage on higher ground!

After writing in January about the stupidity of erecting new deer fencing which the evidence shows will kill the endangered capercaillie (see here) , I was sent the photo along with this commentary of what

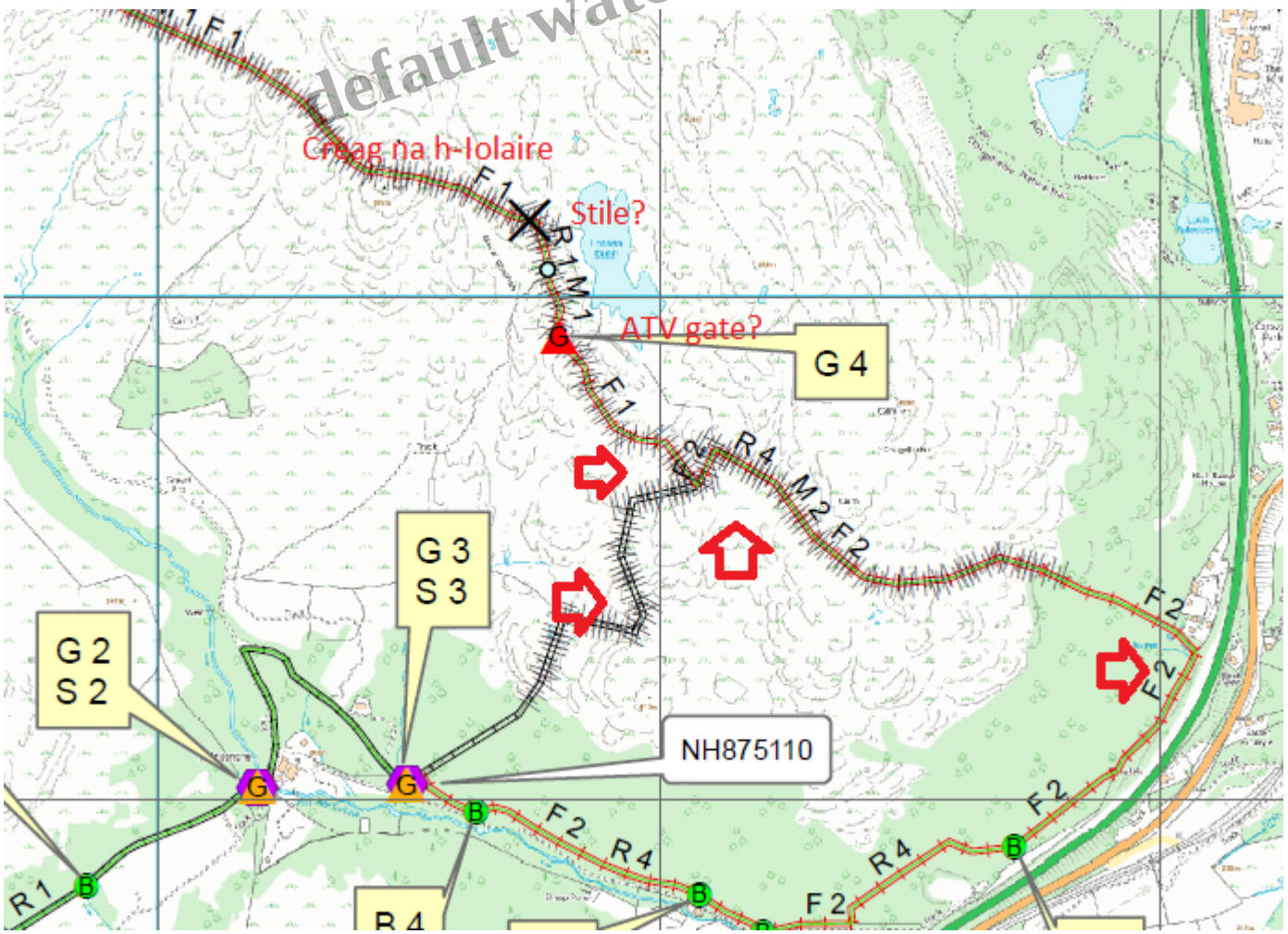
happened after they had walked up the Burma Road and returned via Creag n h-Iolaire, a route they had walked before with no issues:

"This time and quite unexpectedly on my way down, I became corralled by the new and very high deer fence(s). I know there is a lot of new fencing but what I didn't expect and was unable to see due to the terrain was that the fence(s) crossed my path, running off in various directions and literally fenced me in. I searched through my binoculars for signs of styles along the fencing that I could have used but could see none.

I now realised what it must be like for the deer and the hares to be trapped so I wasn't surprised to spot a Peregrine hunting in this area. At least the new fence posts provide a choice of perches for the birds.

As I didn't want to retrace my steps all the way back up the hill as time was getting on, I decided to attempt climbing over this very high fence which was higher than any deer fence I've clambered over in years of hillwalking. Only with the additional support of the original iron fence post plus the rather shuggly new post was I able to get up and over this obstacle and return to the road……."

The map above shows the Lost Forest Phase 1 boundary fence, with stretches on the western and eastern where there is no crossing point in 3km of fence – hardly compatible with access rights! There were, however, supposed to be not just one but two crossing points in close proximity to Creag na h' Iolaire (crag of the eagle) as featured in the account above:



The red arrows mark some of the areas in the deer fencing which have no crossing points and where it would be easy for wildlife or people to feel trapped

Both the stile and ATV gate well have been installed but, if there there are no signs on the deer fencing that they are there and they are out of sight, even to someone who has a pair of binoculars, they might as well not exist.

View down the new fence towards Creag na h'Iolaire (the hummocky ground before Lochan Dubh). How would anyone know to cross?

This is not just a problem where crossing points are hidden by rocky and undulating ground as at Creag na h' Iolaire. Having zig zagged across the slopes of Carn Dearg Mor, looking at the impact of the planting there, I realised that if I had wanted to go to the top, I had no idea where I might have crossed. It was only after looking at the capital items map (above) that I realised there were supposed to be two crossing points in the area (G5 on the map and the nearest X to that).

The barriers that deer fences put in the way of people wanting to enjoy the countryside, whether by walking, biking, skiing or horse-riding have been made even worse by the now prevalent practice of covering the lower half with wire mesh in order to keep hares and other small animals out. It makes climbing the fences, even for those young and fit, much harder and BrewDog's "Lost Forest" is only one example. This problem, of barriers to people's ability to enjoy the countryside, doesn't exist in much of Europe simply because deer are controlled by hunting not fencing (see here). I have spent many weeks in the Alps and Pyrenees and cannot recall a single occasion when I have had to think about how to cross a fence whereas in Scotland its a serious problem, even for people who stick to paths.

The lost landscape at Kinrara

Anyone who has explored the land along the western edge of the Cairngorms National Park between Kingussie and Carrbridge will have across areas of beautiful native woodland on the flanks of the Monadhliath below the generally overgrazed and burnt moorland above. The survival of this woodland is partially explained by the sporting estates which own this land (eg Balavil and Dunachton) valuing it for pheasant shooting – other woodlands remnants have survived in gorges and similarly inaccessible places.

The close ranks of even aged and even shaped trees in the middle left of the photo would show thes were planted long-after the fencing is removed.

Many of these estates then took advantage of the introduction of native woodland grants funding to extend this woodland – effectively a public subsidy for game shooting – but this was generally for relatively small areas of ground. This was basically the position at Kinrara before the owners decided to sell the land to a new laird.

Note the juniper in the foreground

Before BrewDog bought Kinrara in 2021 the estate had ceased to manage the land for shooting game birds and the woodland remnants had started to regenerate naturally. Had that process been allowed to continue the landscape would have changed gradually in a way that would have enhanced the natural beauty that had survived the muirburn. BrewDog, however, wanted to be seen to be doing something. With Scottish Forestry offering to get the public to foot the bill, planting trees over as much of the area as possible became a financial no-brainer.

Before – 2022

The consequence for the landscape have been far reaching.

After – Dec 2023. Note how the mounding has been taken right to the edge of the existing trees and woodland not even allowing a strip for natural regeneration

BrewDog may have planted native trees instead of non-native conifers but their new plantation looks and is going to look just as bad as the notorious sitka plantations of the 1970s, piles of exposed peaty soil and serried ranks of trees. While the public subsidy framework for forestry (tax system and grants) now pays to plant native trees as well as conifers, little else has changed: planting is still based on an industrial model that favours trees being grown as densely as possible. Hence the pockmarks picked out by the snow.

While much of the surface unsightliness will in time be hidden by trees, those that are planted and survive will still form even aged blocks, completely different in appearance to natural woodland.

The importance of green space for mental and physical health is widely acknowledged in Scotland but the implications of that for Scotland's forestry system have so far been ignored. Kinrara was far from perfect – managed for sporting purposes, much of its hillsides were scarred with muirburn and, over the watershed in the Dulnain, overgrazed – but the creation of the Lost Forest has destroyed much of the natural beauty that did exist.

Responsibility for the adverse impacts of large scale tree planting on the landscape, which also destroys peaty soils, releases carbon into the atmosphere etc, lies as much with Scottish Forestry, which oversees and directs the whole system, as individual players like BrewDog. But it takes two to greenwash.

Caring for the landscape – a recreational perspective on infrastructure

Borrow pit along the Burma Rd

The Burma Road was upgraded prior to being sold to BrewDog and the creation of the ugly borrow pits along it was the responsibility of the previous owners. While the Cairngorms National Park Authority could have used its planning powers to require the sides of these pits to be landscaped and the vegetation restored it has never done so.

Having bought Kinrara, BrewDog could have decided to restore the damage done to the landscape by others, as Wildland Ltd has been doing in Glen Feshie and Glen Tromie. So far there has been no indication that they have considered doing this, although as part of the their grant contract with Scottish Forestry they did agree to remove old deer fencing.

Damaged bridge on the Burma Rd. Well designed and crafted infrastructure such as this, using local materials, often enhances people's appreciation and enjoyment of the landscape. Photo credit Parkswatch reader February 2022

Sometimes, relatively small things can tell us a lot about a person or organisation's attitude to the landscape or countryside – like an empty can left at a summit cairn. The bridge in the photo above was damaged by one or more the heavy vehicles being driven up the Burma Rd as part of the Lost Forest Project, whether to "restore" the landscape by planting trees or "repairing" damaged peat bogs. If my memory is right this was brought to BrewDog's attention and they said the problem would be fixed. Whatever the truth of that, aAlmost year later the damage had not been repaired :

Damaged bridge December 2023

As for the landscape impact of deer fences…….I don't think I need to publish any more photos of the fences around the Lost Forest to show their landscape impact. I will, however, tempt fate and declare I have never come across anyone who thinks they enhance to landscape. (BrewDog's contract with Scottish Forestry says they will remove the fences at some undefined point in the future when they are no longer needed).

Re-wilding – the importance of the recreational perspective

While much of current debate about rewilding is framed in terms of how best to restore damage to nature, the first people to really value wild land, such as John Muir to Percy Unna (see here), did so from a recreational perspective which valued landscapes which looked and felt wild. That attitude, of valuing wildness, is now held a very large proportion of the population in Scotland. A YouGov poll for the John Muir Trust in 2017, for example, found a large proportion of the population in Scotland wanted wild land areas to be protected while a more recent survey focussed on the wild

places people value close to home.

In respect of Kinrara, it is noteworthy that the people who have alerted me to much of what has been going on and sent the photos credited to “parkswatch reader”, in this and other posts, have not been visiting mountaineers but local residents who value the area for “recreation”. The view that is still promulgated by some that “wild land” is incompatible with the needs of local communities in the Highlands appears to me fundamentally wrong. It is, for example, the local community that has been leading the objections to the telecommunications mast in the heart of Torridon (see here): there is no contradiction between wanting 4G telecommunications where you live and a wild place out the back where you can get away from it all for recreation.

From a recreational perspective there is a massive difference between the current Scottish Government financed schemes to restore nature through large-scale interventions in the landscape and doing so through re-wilding or enabling nature to restore itself. In the case of woodland restoration the difference is between planting and natural regeneration. The two approaches affect the landscape in very different ways. This is well evidenced by BrewDog’s planting of its Lost Forest, which is best described as brutal, a complete contrast to the much “gentler” processes involved in the natural regeneration which is evident across the site.

In the posts that preceded this, I have shown how not only will the Lost Forest be leaking carbon into the atmosphere for years, due to the destruction of peaty soils, but how most of the trees have died. The planting has been both an disaster for nature in the area and for the humans who used to enjoy it. The Lost Forest is not an isolated case: “if it looks bad, it almost certainly is bad”. What the recreational perspective should tell the Scottish Government is that these large-scale planting projects are not a means of speeding up the restoration of nature or a means of giving re-wilding a kick-start, as often claimed, but a destructive intervention in the landscape.

Were the Scottish Government to adopt a “holistic” approach to nature and people, they would promote an approach to land-use that embraced nature restoration, carbon offsetting, outdoor recreation and landscape. This would include a new approach to forestry where subsidies for planting trees were abolished and instead financial support provided to enable both native and “commercial” woodland to regenerate naturally by reducing deer numbers as happens across most of Europe. This would be a far cheaper and more effective way of addressing the climate and nature emergencies in upland areas than destructive projects like the Lost Forest.

This is not to argue that ALL tree planting is bad, either ecologically or from a recreational perspective. Indeed, volunteers going out to plant a few trees by hand rather than by digger is for many people a valuable recreational experience. We need to be careful, however, that such planting is not used to legitimise practices which damage the natural environment, including planting on peaty soils (of whatever depth), the use of plastic tree tubes or the application of herbicides. The starting point for native woodland restoration, if we really want to achieve the oft quoted policy objective of “the right tree in the right place”, should be to leave most of the choices to nature.

Category

1. Access rights
2. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
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