

BrewDog, Las Vegas and the Scottish Forestry grant system

Description



The BrewDog planting project as seen from a drone in May. On the right the saplings have died.
Photo credit ROBERT PERRY FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

When James Watt, sometime chief executive of the beer company BrewDog, speaks about tree planting in the Highlands, he reminds me of unpleasant landowners of the past. In his latest attempt at defending BrewDog's disastrous planting efforts on their Kinrara estate near Aviemore in the Cairngorms National Park, Watt did not mince his words when speaking to the Sunday Times: "If you're looking through a reputational lens, we'd have been better if we'd taken that £20million and spent it on hookers and coke in Vegas" ([see here](#)) .



James Watt of BrewDog in an Instagram post where he says: "Hanging in the Scottish Highlands. Scotland is kinda cool." But there are doubts about the motive for his stewardship

Photo and caption credit Sunday Times

During the 1970s and 80s, as the area scientific officer for the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), based in Aviemore, my colleagues and I dealt with some unpleasant people in the Cairngorms. There was Lord Dulverton, owner of Glenfeshie estate, who repeatedly broke bird protection legislation and, when called to account, simply solved the problem by inviting the NCC chairman to dinner in the House of Lords. Over on Deeside John Kluge, once the richest man in America, bought Mar Lodge Estate in 1989, reputedly to please his wife, a strip tease artist who wanted to be close to Balmoral so she could "rub shoulders" with the Queen. Before that the estate was owned by Gerald Panchaud, a Swiss banker, who told my colleague, as he was trying to renegotiate our nature reserve agreement with him, that the public money on offer to him was a paltry sum. "It would cost me more to hire a woman for the night in London than to accept government money to manage my estate in the Cairngorms" was his curt response.

Those characters from the past, who left some appalling scars on our mountains, are no longer with us. Nowadays the ancient Caledonian pinewoods are creeping back up the hillsides. Stopping overgrazing by culling excessive numbers of red deer is the key, as demonstrated in the natural regeneration of Glenfeshie, under the ownership of the Danish citizen, Anders Povlsen, and on Mar Lodge Estate, now owned by the National Trust for Scotland. Quite why James Watt of BrewDog failed to learn from these nearby landowners might seem to be a mystery, until we understand the role of the Scottish Forestry grant system.

Less important than the temptations of Las Vegas, was the money available from this grant system, providing BrewDog agreed to create its Lost Forest by erecting miles of new deer fencing, churning up the peaty ground with diggers and planting nursery grown trees. Both BrewDog and Scottish Forestry

ignored repeated advice that this was entirely the wrong strategy for Kinrara estate whose northern border meets the ancient Caledonian Forest, astride the River Dulnain above Carrbridge.



Over much of Kinrara the mounding is hard to see from a distance at ground level because of the vegetation around it, including the extensive natural regeneration of trees. In the area covered by this photo Scots Pine (highlighted in foreground by arrows) have been planted among extensive birch regeneration". Photo credit Dave Morris

The opportunity to simply reduce red deer numbers and encourage the natural regeneration of this woodland up to the altitudinal tree line was squandered. Instead, we have huge blocks of planted woodland, an ecological insult in such an area, combined with endless lines of deer fencing, impacting a vast tract of wild landscape of outstanding recreational value, including slopes which used to provide some of the best ski touring opportunities in Scotland.



Part of three large fenced enclosures erected to create BrewDog's Lost Forest on Kinrara estate. Photo credit Dave Morris.

BrewDog are due to receive in excess of £1.2 million of public money for damaging the national park in this way. Two years ago I told the Scottish Government's then forestry minister, Mairi McAllan MSP, that the Scottish Government was wasting £millions of public money through the forestry grant scheme, giving BrewDog's Kinrara estate as the latest example. Nothing has changed.

Landowners like BrewDog continue to erect miles of unnecessary deer fencing, churning up peaty soils to plant trees on the mounds created, only for those trees to die in dry weather. Meanwhile all the naturally regenerating trees and other vegetation, provided free of charge by nature, are ignored.

During the last three years over £6 million of public money has been given to a total of just three estates for tree planting schemes within the Badenoch and Strathspey section of the Cairngorms National Park. Natural regeneration of the existing vegetation would have been a far better option, capturing carbon and restoring biodiversity from day one, with more deer stalkers employed, no deer fences erected and minimum costs to the public purse. This £6 million covers Scottish Forestry grant given to Muckrach Estate near Grantown on Spey, BrewDog's Kinrara Estate by Aviemore and to the Standard Life Investments Property Income Trust who bought land to the east of Kingussie and Newtonmore and renamed it the Far Ralia Estate. Standard Life, who have now been bought over by the abrdn investment company, boasted at the time of purchase how this was assisted by the

opportunities offered by forestry grants.

All three estates have been disturbing peaty soils with digging machines used to create mounds on which the trees are planted. Planted trees have far less chance of survival during dry summers when compared to naturally regenerated trees with their extensive rootstocks. Hundreds of trees have died on Kinrara estate within a year of planting.



The dead stick, immediately in front of the white handkerchief, is the original Scots pine planted by BrewDog in 2023 and funded through the Scottish Forestry grant system. Adjacent to this dead stick is the new sapling planted in 2024 to replace the dead stick as part of the SF planting grant conditions. This new planting is funded by BrewDog. In the background are at least four naturally regenerated birch trees, all growing rapidly along with thousands of other naturally regenerating trees. Photo credit Dave Morris.

This mounding is permitted by Scottish Forestry even though the exposed peat is expected to dry out and emit carbon into the atmosphere for many years to come, whereas a naturally regenerated tree, established through seed dispersal, needs no soil cultivation, artificial fertiliser or the carbon cost of growing in a nursery and transportation to planting site.



Mounding of peaty soils on abrdn's Far Ralia Estate prior to planting. Photo credit Dave Morris

On abrdn's Far Ralia estate their unwise tree planting has also been accompanied by excessive damage to an ancient military road, constructed by General Wade in the early 1700s. Dreadful new hill road construction has also taken place on the Muckrach Estate. The business owners of this estate who are based in Birmingham, England, are creating a scarred landscape reminiscent of scenes from the front line in Ukraine. All of this is going on in the Cairngorms National Park, supposedly one of the UK's finest areas for wildlife, landscape, recreational value and community engagement.



Hill road construction on Muckrach Estate. Photo credit Dave Morris

At the recent Scottish Land Commission conference in Aviemore I was told that the chief executive of one of Scotland's main forestry companies was now saying that they had no need for forestry grant. The steady rise in Scottish land value, when traded on the world property markets, without any restrictions to protect national and local community interests, provide sufficient reward to private individuals, corporate bodies and investors. Forestry grants are no longer necessary for anyone contemplating the purchase of a few thousand hectares of upland Scotland.

My conclusion from this conference is that the time for action by the Scottish Government, at First Minister level, is long overdue. In a recent discussion in Dundee, at an event hosted by the Courier newspaper, John Swinney emphasised his determination to ensure that Scotland got value for money in all aspects of government expenditure. He could start this process by ordering a complete freeze on all forestry grants until such time as the system has been radically reformed. We need to stop funding

crazy planting schemes in the uplands and divert the grant aid to farmers in the lowlands – that is where our trees need to be planted, on mineral, not peaty soils, to deliver carbon capture, biodiversity recovery, timber for construction and recreational opportunity, all at best value for the public purse.

Meanwhile we also need to deal with BrewDog and their fellow investors in our wild places. It is fortunate that the Scottish Parliament has provided us with the essential power. Part 5 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 is the key. This gives compulsory purchase powers to local community groups to acquire land for the purposes of sustainable development. A community development trust centred on Aviemore could use these powers to bring the whole of BrewDog's Kinrara estate into community ownership. Surely James Watt would be happy with this outcome to his Cairngorms adventure? With the profit made from a Kinrara sale he could finance a trip to Las Vegas.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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2. conservation
3. forestry
4. land reform
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6. Local communities
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Date Created

July 5, 2024

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