

## Muckrach (2) – £2,581,220 from Scottish Forestry to trash the natural environment

### Description



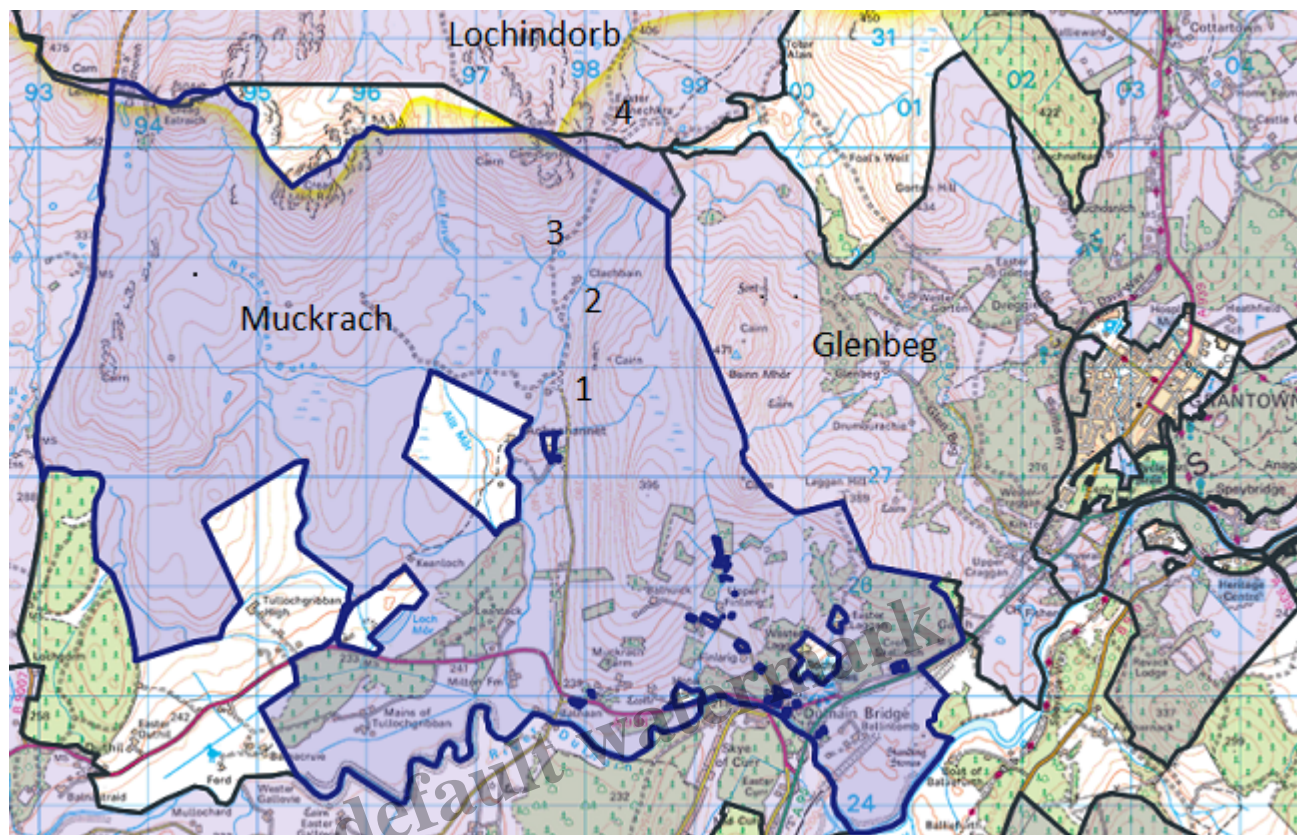
Note how diggers have been driven through bracken and the extensive area of natural regeneration on the right of the unlawfully upgraded section of road mounding as they go.

Following my post on the disastrous new section of road at Muckrach ([see here](#)), the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) informed me that they weren't aware of the work but were now looking into it. I then heard from another source that the CNPA were due to meet with Savills, who oversaw the whole Muckrach woodland creation project, and subsequently that work has now started "to repair" the damage.

The problem is that once damage is done to soils, whether by the creation of tracks or mounding to plant trees, it cannot be restored, only mitigated. Moreover, where the rules are ignored and irreparable damage done, no-one is ever held to account for this, not even in what is supposed to be a National Park.

This post will consider how a project that appears to have started with good intentions has ended up causing so much damage to the natural environment in the Cairngorms National Park

## Background and purpose of the Muckrach tree planting project



Muckrach and its neighbours. My short walk ended at 4, the boundary with the Lochindorb estate

Muckrach is, according to Who Owns Scotland, owned by the Trustees of Richard H & Niall Hamilton Anstruther-Gough-Calthorpe. It is part of the Calthorpe Group, whose interests are concentrated in the Egbaston area of Birmingham. There is an excellent brief history on the Calthorpe Group website ([see here](#)) which describes how, over the course of 300 years, the Calthorpe Estate was transformed from a rural to an urban business, focusing on property investment and development, while remaining in the hands of the same family.

Muckrach was bought by Calthorpe Estates in the 1960s, as explained in their background to the tree planting project ([see here](#)). They describe the three primary businesses at Muckrach prior to that as being “farming, forestry and residential property”. This suggests that the intensive management of a large part of the estate for grouse shooting was for the family’s private pleasure, not profit. Being, however, “a progressive property investment and development company,” it appears the family firm started to think about climate change and how it might meet net zero. It then saw an opportunity to use the land it owned at Muckrach to offset its carbon emissions down in Birmingham. It looked like a win-win, “a landscape-scale project, contributing to mitigating climate change while creating a diverse habitat, all within the Cairngorms National Park”.



Unfortunately, Calthorpe – whose expertise lies in urban regeneration – then entrusted the entire project to Savills, who among other things are experts in milking grants out of the public sector. The result, as I witnessed on my visit of 11th June, is the opposite to what Calthorpe intended.

## Natural regeneration at Muckrach



Location – Point 1 on map

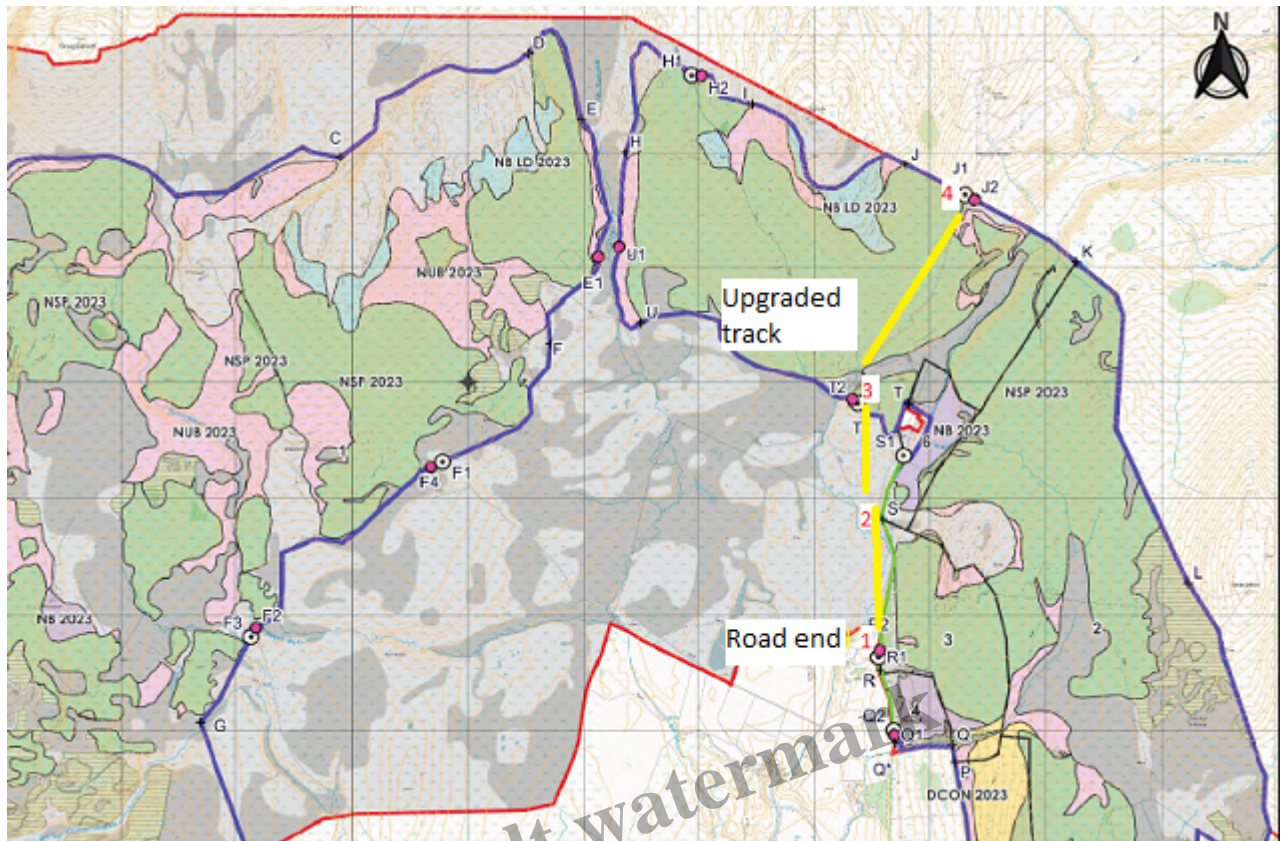
I started my walk at the road end Achnahannet where the newly enclosed area of moorland appears quite similar to the area covered by Phase 1 of BrewDog's Lost Forest ([see here](#)), mature trees scattered over the landscape and even from a distance extensive natural regeneration apparent.



Location – Point 1 on map; area to the right of the gate with naturally developing woodland

Both the old and the new natural regeneration is explained by the estate's muirburn practices: while the majority of the land was affected, there were still large areas which were not burned. That allowed individual trees to survive and area of woodland to develop. As a result much of the area through which I walked would have developed into woodland very quickly through natural regeneration without any planting – as long as grazing levels had been kept low.





Planting plan agreed with Scottish Forestry for Muckrach obtained in response to an FOI request: the green shows predominantly Scots Pine, the pink upland birch and the horizontal lines areas reserved for natural regeneration. The yellow line marks my walk and the numbers the main areas where the photos shown in this post were taken

Just one small area along the route I walked were earmarked for natural regeneration – the area in the photo above by the road end (hard to see on the map). Almost all the rest was to be planted, mainly with Scots Pine.





The stupidity of the contract agreed with Scottish Forestry should be apparent to anyone walking through the gate to take a closer look at what was happening on the ground. Mounds of peaty soil had been excavated to plant trees among an extensive area of recent natural regeneration. It appears that Scottish Forestry never bothered to inspect the land to check whether forking out £2,581,220 to plant trees was good use of public money. But then, as I have explained before, all Scottish Forestry are now interested in is meeting the Scottish Government's targets for planting trees.





Location – Point 1 on map

Just as with BrewDog's Dead Forest ([see here](#)), a high proportion of the trees planted in the area near the gate had died, although that was not the case elsewhere along the route I took. Since most of the trees were planted this year, it is probably too early to tell how many have survived but in a sense that is irrelevant, with the extensive natural regeneration round about turning over these soils to leak carbon into the atmosphere was never justified.





Walking towards point 2, I did not cross the fence to take a closer look at all the young trees spreading across the hillside. I cannot say for certain therefore that they were not planted but most look too large to have been planted in the last year while the obvious mounding in the foreground, which was done over the last year, looks bare. Scottish Forestry should be forced to account why all this area was not reserved for natural regeneration on the Muckrach forest plan.

Through a Freedom of Information request to Scottish Forestry asking for all correspondence about the planting, I have obtained copies of emails from Savills, NatureScot, RSPB, Scottish Forestry and Calum Campbell, whose facebook post ([see here](#)) prompted my visit. The quotes that follow are from an email from Savills to Scottish Forestry dated 14th May and entitled “Muckrach (sic) Estate New Plantation Creation” – that just about sums up their project, plantation not woodland.





Tree bags with smaller heap of fertiliser bags behind – the bulldozed track is just visible in the middle distance behind left.

When we got to a fork in the road we came across what looked suspiciously like a dump – it almost looked as though someone intended to bury all these bags rather than re-use them. I was interested to find out afterwards, therefore that Savills had made the following claim to Scottish Forestry almost a month before our visit:

#### **Have we finished the project?**

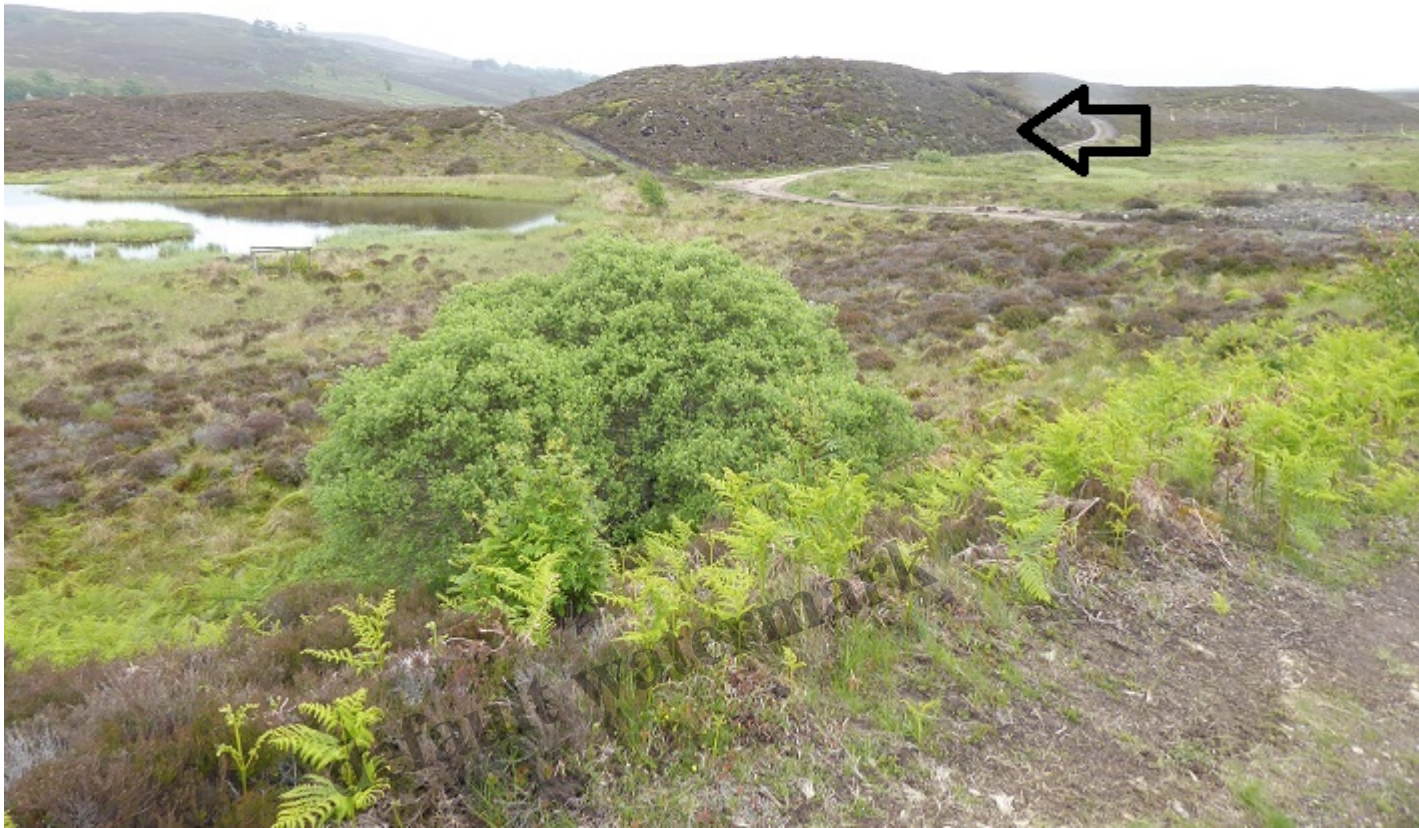
- Ground prep was completed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2024. The final 2 excavators were on site but idle at roadside until they were uplifted 14<sup>th</sup> May 2024.
- Our tree planting team completed all planting and gathering in of empty planting bags yesterday, 16th May 2024.

Savills may have been gathering up the bags but what they didn't say that they hadn't bothered to remove them from the site. In the intervening period a number had blown away. There were also a significant number of bags of unused fertiliser:



As if its not enough for the tree planting industry to destroy soils by turning them over, they then add fertiliser. These new plantations of native trees are anything but natural and should never have been allowed in the Cairngorms National Park.





Location 3. The arrow points to the slope scraped away to plant Scots Pine among naturally regenerating deciduous trees

Just by a pond excavated for duck shooting, there was a bank which illustrated much of what is wrong with this tree planting project:





Ground excavated and vegetation destroyed to plant Scots Pine





Hole dug for pine next to naturally regenerated juniper





Mounding either side of birch





Planted pine seedling next to naturally regenerated birch

Despite a mixture of native deciduous trees successfully regenerating on this bank Scottish Forestry effectively agreed to pay Savills to replace them with Scots Pine (which eventually are likely to shade out the smaller trees). In my view this is tree planting vandalism but what does the senior management team in Scottish Forestry care as long as its meeting the Scottish Government's tree planting targets? And what do Savills care so long as they are being paid?

While the digger operator appears to have made a reasonable attempt to scrape holes in between existing trees on this bank, up by the newly excavated track we came across evidence of gorse being destroyed to plant trees:





“Limited collateral damage”

There is an explanation as to why in some places native trees and shrubs have been destroyed to plant new one in the email from Savills to Scottish Forestry:

#### **Damage to Natural regeneration**

- We have not sought to actively damage natural regeneration of which there are several areas on site. There were a couple of locations designed/approved for planting that when we came to ground prep, we noted a low density of natural regeneration. We therefore mounded through the regen where this could be undertaken with limited collateral damage, in order to achieve the necessary stocking density as per our FGS contract. Otherwise we worked around regen and mounded non-regenerating ground adjacent. We can provide photographs as examples of this approach.

The claim that “there are several areas of natural regeneration on site” completely understates the truth but, having ignored its existence when submitting the grant claim, Savills then had to plant trees to meet the conditions of the grant. What a crazy and destructive use of public money!





Deer fence between location 1 and 2, showing yet more isolated trees and developing area of woodland. All the fencing has been marked with bamboo canes.

In a further misuse of public money, the whole area has been enclosed with deer fencing despite the fact that deer density had been clearly low enough to enable trees to regenerate and woodland to develop naturally. Both perimeter fences have been marked with bamboo canes despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that this prevents birds like capercaillie flying into them. To give them credit, both RSPB and NatureScot in emails raised concerns about this fencing. Below is Savills reply to Scottish Forestry:



- Use of bamboo canes – In the issues log for our FGS application we stated: *"We are proposing to mark the entire fence against bird strike with bamboo canes, wooden droppers or similar, with fence post reinforcement added for the more exposed sections. UV stable netting will not be employed as this is visually intrusive and at odds with the need to reduce visual impact of the fence in the landscape. Fences will be monitored for bird strike."*

The reference to different marking methods was made to provide flexibility when balancing the very real tensions between the desires of Nature Scot and RSPB to see the fence marked with wooden droppers, and the concerns raised by the CNPA in relation to the visibility of the fence in the wider landscape. You may recall we undertook a detailed landscape analysis as part of our application and adjusted the fenceline to minimise visual impacts, including routing through existing regeneration next the B9007, all in order to try and satisfy landscape concerns raised by CNPA.

██████████ suggestion of using marking materials like orange netting are completely at odds with sensitive landscapes like Muckrach and were not considered appropriate for that reason.

Under "Landscape" in the CNPA response to our FGS application dated 4<sup>th</sup> August 2022 they wrote *"...key to mitigating adverse effects is careful siting and design and it is predicted that the proposed deer fences (marked for birds) would result in some significant negative effects on the landscape character, visual amenity and SLQs of the Cairngorms National Park...."*

In addition, we have erected deer fencing in an environment that can experience strong winds and high snowfall, often in conjunction. Increasing the sail effect on deer fencing with marking is a major project risk when we consider the potential for fences to fail under such conditions and deer gaining access to a large area of new native woodland planting. Therefore to mitigate and balance the concerns above, we marked the entire fence with bamboo canes.

In our issues log we undertook to monitor the fences once constructed with respect of bird collisions and we will adhere to that commitment. We will happily work with RSPB and Nature Scot to ascertain an appropriate survey schedule and share survey resources and results with both organisations as requested. If there is evidence of detrimental levels of bird strike, then we will review the current marking and our client will consider upgrading it with wooden droppers in specific locations as appropriate.

First, note the vague agreement between Savills and Scottish Forestry in which either wooden droppers or bamboo canes would be used to mark the fences: the first is proven to reduce (not end) the number of birds strikes, the second is not. Savills chose the second, unproven and much cheaper option.



Second, then Savills try and play off nature conservation v landscape interests saying that the CNPA had raised concerns about the impact of miles of fencing on the landscape. This is quite true, they did – I have a copy of their response to the grant application – but they also expressed concerns about the impact of fencing on wildlife.

The answer to this issue should have been quite obvious, continue to keep deer density to two per square km or less and there would be no need for any deer fences. That would have saved the public a whole lot of money, provided some long-term local employment, been far better for birds like capercaillie and black grouse – since even fences marked with wooden droppers kill – and far better for the landscape.



The specks visible in the middle distance are mounds, similar to that shown in the foreground

Walking towards the boundary with Lochindorb estate, the extent of the natural regeneration on the eastern side of Muckrach was clear to see. There was no planting needed here, only deer control and the area would have continued to develop naturally into woodland. Instead, a naturally diversifying landscape is to be turned into new monolithic plantations, mainly of those two a penny tree species, Scots Pine and birch..





View from the boundary with the Lochindorb estate just below the track – location 4.

The CNPA was right, the deer fence has had a significant landscape impact. On the uphill side of the track it was the same:





Looking up the hill from inside the deer fence at location 4

While there were far fewer trees because of muirburn, the amount of bare ground that had created should have made it easy for trees to get established naturally. Instead, Savills with Scottish Forestry's approval has created new areas of bare soil, through mounding, on which to plant trees.





View from the boundary fence onto the Lochindorb Estate

The senselessness of the Scottish Government's tree planting policy and the failure of the Cairngorms National Park Authority to facilitate landscape scale conservation was further illustrated at the boundary with Lochindorb. While Muckrach is now being paid to plant trees, with all the destruction that entails, the Lochindorb estate next door is still allowed to burn them.

A further post will consider further the impact the Muckrach woodland creation project will have on carbon emissions, the finances and the role of the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

## Category

1. Cairngorms

## Tags

1. CNPA



2. conservation
3. Freedom of Information
4. grouse moors
5. hill tracks
6. landed estates
7. landscape
8. Litter
9. NatureScot
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**Date Created**

July 12, 2024

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