

The proposed sell-off of the Cashel Forest – how the Lomond & Trossachs National Park Authority is serving private interests

Description



Degraded peatland at Cashel, partially recovering but also threatened by spreading sitka. Photo credit LLTNPA and Scotland Contracts Portal

One might have hoped that the controversy caused by the office-bearers of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society to try and sell of what was supposed to be a forest for a thousand years at Cashel ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)) might have caused the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) to reflect on the public interest. This is not just a matter of protecting all the public investment that has taken place at Cashel over the last 25 years, it is also about how the proposed sale might affect the extensive attempts to improve conservation management along the eastern shore of Loch Lomond.

Instead, however, the LLTNPA is rushing ahead to hand the Cashel Forest Trust trustees another £90k

in public money for peatland restoration before the proposed sale goes through. In doing so they they will be inflating the land-price and benefitting private investors, just as Scottish Forestry has done at Far Ralia ([see here](#)).

The Phase 2 Peatland Restoration at Cashel

Scottish Natural Heritage/NatureScot oversees the Scottish Government's £250m peatland restoration programme but in our two National Parks this is managed by our National Park Authorities. Information on the Scotland Contracts Portal shows that NatureScot were involved in the decision to press ahead with Phase 2 of Peatland Restoration at Cashel despite the proposed sale:

01/08/2024	Peatland Restoration ↗
  	Reference No: AUG511164
	OCID: ocds-r6ebe6-0000774124
	Published By: Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority
	Deadline Date: 26-Aug-24
	Notice Type: 02 Contract Notice (below FTS threshold or call offs of any value)
24/07/2024	Notification : Restoration - Cashel Estate - East Loch Lomond - Stirlingshire - LLTNPA ↗
	Reference No: JUL510533
	OCID: ocds-r6ebe6-0000773310
	Published By: Scottish Natural Heritage
	Deadline Date:
	Notice Type: 01 Prior Information Notices (below FTS threshold or call offs of any value)

NatureScot's Prior Information Notice of 24th July has now been withdrawn but included the documentation in the contract advertised by the LLTNPA on 1st August.

Section II: Object

II.1) Scope of the procurement

II.1.1) Title

Peatland Restoration

II.1.2) Main CPV code

45112100

II.1.3) Type of contract

Works

II.1.4) Short description

Peatland Restoration Cashel phase 2

II.1.5) Estimated total value

Value excluding VAT: 90 000.00 GBP

II.1.6) Information about lots

This contract is divided into lots: No

Extract LLTNPA contract notice

The background section in the LLTNPA's Statement of Requirements document includes the following:

*“Cashel Estate is currently on the market. Cashel Forest Trust and LLTNPA are committed to the peatland restoration project and intend that all peatland works are completed and signed off before the estate is sold. As such, there is a hard deadline of **19 December 2024** for all works including snagging and final checks to be completed by (see **Section 5**).”*

In other words the LLTNPA is fully co-operating with the sale. A National Park worthy of the name might have put the whole project on pause and asked the Cashel Trust trustees to think again in the public interest.

That, however, might have interfered with the Scottish Government's peatland restoration targets.

The Scottish Government is also indirectly involved in this case through Dr Peter Phillips, their head of Natural Capital Land Management who is a trustee of the Cashel Forest Trust and not just in an advisory capacity. The LLTNPA's contract documentation shows there will be a site visit for potential contractors on Tuesday 13th August but:

“Alternatively, if you wish to access the site independently at another time please contact Peter Phillips, Cashel Trustee at: peterphillips1603@gmail.com.....”

Peatland restoration and the price of land at Cashel – another financial bubble?

The Scottish Government along with its agencies and non-departmental public boards have been putting a lot of effort into trying to create a carbon markets to attract private finance to restore and manage peatland. A report last year for the Scottish Government by Finance Earth ([see here](#)) – (NB Scottish Government lead Peter Phillips!) – showed the investment wasn’t materialising:

“At current market carbon prices, peatland restoration projects are not viable without partial (and typically substantial) public funding or private forms of grant funding.”

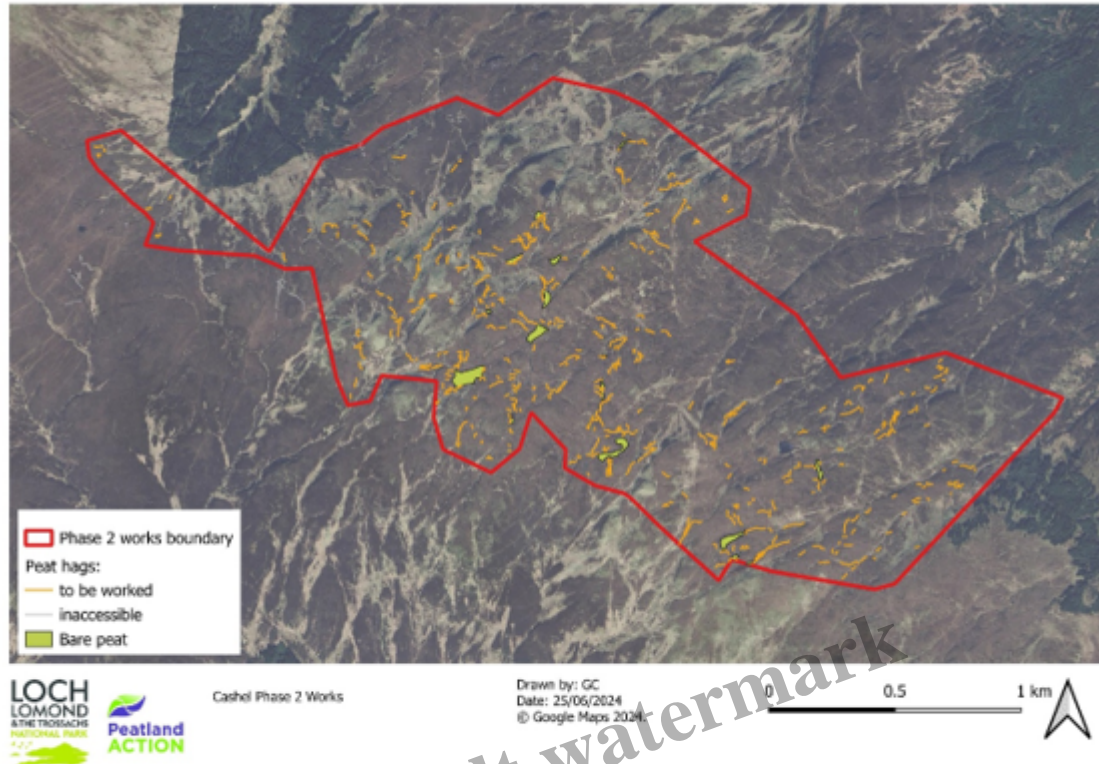
Instead of re-thinking its whole approach to “natural capital”, the Scottish Government continues to hand over significant amounts of public money to city interests. The only justification for publicly funded pump priming of the peatland market, as at Cashel, is if the Pending Issuance Units and Carbon Credits this generates were then to produce sufficient income to manage the peatland appropriately. Given the high degree of involvement from the Scottish Government’s head of Natural Capital Land Management, Peter Phillip, Cashel provides a test case for that. That even Mr Phillips appears incapable of extracting conservation income from Pending Issuance Units and Carbon Credits, which would have obviated any need to put Cashel up for sale, provide strong evidence that trying to create a market to restore and manage peatland is never going to work.

Instead, Scottish Government funding for peatland restoration – like tree planting – is serving to fuel land speculation. The process is illustrated by Goldcrest’s sales brochure for Cashel:

In partnership with NatureScot and LLTNPA, grant funding from Peatland ACTION aided the restoration of around 80 hectares of degraded peatland during “Phase 1” works in early 2024. A further circa 140 hectares of Peatland ACTION funded restoration work – “Phase 2” – is scheduled to start in September 2024. The current peatland restoration project at Cashel is estimated to yield around 33,000 tCO₂e in emissions reductions. The project is currently in the final stages of Peatland Code “Project Plan Validation” and is expected to result in around 28,000 tCO₂e of claimable emissions reductions (after deductions for the Peatland Code risk buffer). This will correspond to around 28,000 Pending Issuance Units (PIUs) which are expected to be issued later in 2024, and will be included in the sale of Lot 4.”

Lot 4 is on the market for £2,250,000.

Map 2. Map of project works



Please note this survey is based on a walk-over survey, drone flights and the study of aerial photographs and maps – it is not definitive, and we would expect there may be variation due to unseen hazards such as ground not suitable for diggers.

An example of the very thorough documentation – also paid for out of public funds.
What did it cost?

LLTNPA staff's contract documentation for the Phase 2 peatland restoration is extremely thorough, with lots of photos ([see here](#)), video fly-overs of the site, a detailed specification of the work to be done (filling in drains, reprofiling hags and restoring areas of bare peat) and important background information:

“Historic over-grazing and climatic change across the whole site has caused the peat in the Phase 2 works area to become degraded, forming hags and bare peat pans. Prior to the acquisition by RSFS the estate had been sheep grazed but these were taken off in 1996. As a result, some peat hags are beginning to recover naturally where they are not undercut with water in gullies: the reduction in grazing pressure has allowed vegetation growth on the edge of the hags to develop and start to grow over the bare peat hag faces.”



Another view of bare area in top photo. Bog cotton and other plants readily revegetate areas of exposed peat as long as they are not grazed. Photo credit LLTNPA

The documentation also rightly states that:

“Before restoring any site, the reasons for peatland erosion need to be assessed and addressed. At Cashel previous high levels of grazing animals would appear to have been a contributory factor”

before wrongly, in my view, concluding;

“This level has been lessened with the removal of sheep numbers and better deer management, and so restoration can be undertaken.”

While the photos show the erosive action of water and frost heave, which is thought to prevent vegetation getting established on bare peat, they also show lots of animal footprints:



The circular areas where the peat surface appear very uneven may well have been caused by frost heave, rather than trampling feet. Note again how the peat surface in the background is revegetating and the sitka sapling in the foreground. Photo credit LLTNPA.



Animals have trampled the peat in the foreground almost back to the original surface before the peat formed and cut a track through the bank in the middle ground. Note the trees. Photo credit LLTNPA.



Animal tracks up the side of peat hags demonstrating how grazing and trampling contributes to their erosion. Photo credit LLTNPA

There is no attempt in the contract documentation to assess the continued impact of grazing animals and how this might affect the outcome of the proposed restoration and no mention at all of the sitka which are spreading all over the hillside as a result of the reduction in grazing levels:



This photo was taken to illustrate some of the banks the LLTNPA wishes to reprofile – much of the erosion pictured appears to have been caused by natural processes other than trampling and grazing – but shows how trees are spreading across the bog

Cashel – time to reform peatland restoration

While generally by far the most effective way to expand woodland in Scotland is to reduce grazing levels and then let natural regeneration takes its course – even if it results in some peatland being colonised by trees and releasing carbon from the soil – there should be some exceptions for non-native species like Sitka.

At present there is a large-scale conservation project to remove non-native conifers from the east shores of Loch Lomond and restore native oak woodland. Removing sitka from the lower ground while letting it spread over the higher ground, as grazing levels reduce, makes no sense from a woodland perspective and is storing up problems for the future (as the trees on the hill will produce seed which

will then threaten the natural integrity of the oak woods). Ignoring the sitka makes even less sense when the public are paying to restore the peatland on the higher ground.

The LLTNPA should have been saying all of this, loud and clear and considering how the sale of Cashel could affect wider conservation objectives in the area. As a minimum it should have refused to fund the Phase 2 Cashel peatland restoration project – and others like it – without a long-term plan to control the invasive sitka and grazing animals. I suspect the staff working for Peatland Action know this but they are not allowed to say so because it would set back the Scottish Government's peatland restoration targets still further. Meantime, the one LLTNPA board member who has real expertise in this and might have prompted a re-think, Richard Johnson, has declared ([see here](#)) that his business, MNV Consulting, was awarded a peatland restoration contract last year at Glen Finglas in the Trossachs part of the National Park. Money not only speaks louder than words, it silences criticism.

The fact that the Cashel Forest trustees are taking the money without putting in place any mechanisms to ensure their land is properly managed after its sold is just cynical. The whole point of the voluntary sector is to challenge what government does and offer an alternative to the private sector, not join the government and private sector gravy trains.

The photos for the Phase 2 Cashel Peatland Restoration project help show how over-grazing damaged peatland at Cashel and how reduced grazing levels are now enabling some of it to recover naturally, while at the same time creating new risks in the form of regenerating sitka spruce. The implication is that most of the bog would have recovered naturally in time if grazing levels had been kept low.

This suggests that instead of forking out large sums of public money in grants for short-term restoration projects and trying to create carbon markets the Scottish Government would be far better redirecting its resources towards reducing deer numbers to 2 km or less (numbers on east Loch Lomond have been far in excess of that) and paying landowners to weed out non-native trees. In short, the Scottish Government and its agents, NatureScot and the LLTNPA, should have awarded the Cashel Trust £90k to do just that, on condition they kept the land and managed it in the public interest.

The LLTNPA would never do that, however, because it always puts private interests first. There are strong parallels between Cashel and Balloch where the LLTNPA raised no objections to Scottish Enterprise selling off public land cheaply, sat on the interview panel that appointed Flamingo Land as preferred developer and has never offered any meaningful support to the local community. How the LLTNPA has bungled Cashel is another reason why we need a proper review of National Parks before the Scottish Government creates a new one down in Galloway.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

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