

King Charles, BrewDog, deer and pinewoods

Description



Aerial view of part of BrewDog's Lost Forest. Photo credit Robert Perry for The Sunday Times <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/trouble-brewing-forestry-campaigners-james-watt-brewdog-jvfw9dt52>

Importance of the pinewoods.

Forestry policy, private and public landowners and deer management will be under scrutiny next week at the native pinewoods conference in Fort William (28/29 Oct [see here](#)). This post examines what needs to happen to save our ancient Caledonian pinewoods and who might lead the way.

The future of our Caledonian pinewoods, descended by natural regeneration over thousands of years following the last Ice Age, is at stake. Felling, invasive non-native species, inappropriate planting and

excessive grazing by red deer are threatening many of the 84 remnants of these ancient woodlands, scattered across a vast tract of the Highlands. From the large natural pinewoods around the Cairngorms massif to the small fragments left in the glens of western Highlands, many are in trouble – over 20% are in a degraded state, requiring urgent action to save what remains and expand them over the adjacent landscape.

This conference will see the launch of the Caledonian Pinewoods Partnership Prospectus, involving land managers, government agencies, NGOs, communities and other relevant stakeholders. It aims to develop and deliver a strategy to restore and expand the Caledonian pinewoods. The hope is this will lead to landscape -scale management approaches that prioritise native pinewood recovery through natural processes. Currently approximately 17,000 hectares are reasonably well protected. It is hoped to expand this to at least 135,000 ha by 2030. The main obstacles at present are overgrazing by excessively large herds of red deer, invasion by non-native species, including exotic conifers and rhododendron and planting in places where natural regeneration should take precedence.

Private landowners

Many of the Caledonian pinewoods are in private ownership. Some are in excellent condition, notably on the western slopes of the Cairngorms where the Danish landowner, Anders Polvsen, has reduced deer numbers down to levels that permit extensive natural regeneration up to the natural tree line. Further east, on Balmoral and neighbouring estates, there still is excessive overgrazing despite more than 20 years of voluntary control schemes overseen by NatureScot and its predecessors. The minutes of the South Grampian Deer Management Group (14th May 2024 [see here](#)) sum up the problem with Forest and Land Scotland explaining that despite a large cull: “some large herds of deer had been noted on the property, including up to 1,000 on one day, but their origin was unknown”.

It is hoped that King Charles will take an interest in the work of the Pinewoods Partnership. Balmoral has, for many years been struggling to persuade fellow landowners to take the necessary action to reduce deer numbers. Now, however, the arrival of the Partnership, plus recent legislative changes that allow red deer stags to be culled throughout the year, may provide the necessary momentum to get all the relevant landowners to cooperate more effectively in this part of the Cairngorms to reduce overgrazing. That will bring huge benefit to the wildlife and landscape from the heart of the forest to mountain summit. King Charles has the opportunity to set the standard on his own land and provide an example to all the other owners of ancient pinewood across Scotland.

BrewDog

Part of the pressure for a new strategy for the pinewoods comes from the invasion of the Highlands by investment companies and other commercial interests determined to cash in on the climate and biodiversity crises for their own profit. On the front line of that invasion has been the craft brewing company BrewDog with their disastrous purchase of the Kinrara estate near Aviemore. Their decision to erect huge lengths of fencing to exclude deer from large parts of their estate, followed by an intensive planting programme, was entirely the wrong strategy when the adjacent Dulnain native

pinewood could have been easily expanded by simply reducing red deer numbers by culling. Instead in some of the planted areas over 90% of the trees died ([see here](#)), the fences are a massive intrusion into a wild landscape ([see here](#) and [here](#)) and over grazing continues outside the fences. Even more remarkable, it seems that BrewDog failed to seek advice from neighbouring estates who have been trying to reduce deer numbers and restore habitats. That is why better dialogue is at the core of the new Partnership Prospectus.

Public bodies

The BrewDog experience, along with other corporate investment adventures, also points to a clear need to reform the regulatory environment for forestry, along with major changes to the financial incentives which support forestry and ecological recovery. Much more priority needs to be given to the support of natural regeneration instead of planting. A better balance is needed between the funding responsibilities of Scottish Forestry and NatureScot, with new guidance provided to Forestry and Land Scotland in the management of the Caledonian pinewoods which they own.

30 x 30 Biodiversity objectives

A new vision for Caledonian pinewood, alongside meaningful action, will make a major contribution to international biodiversity obligations, notably the agreement to get 30% of the UK land mass in favourable ecological condition by 2030. The UK and Scottish Governments should therefore give their full support to the Caledonian Pinewoods Partnership Prospectus.

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Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. conservation
2. Deer
3. forestry
4. NatureScot
5. scottish forestry

Date Created

October 25, 2024

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