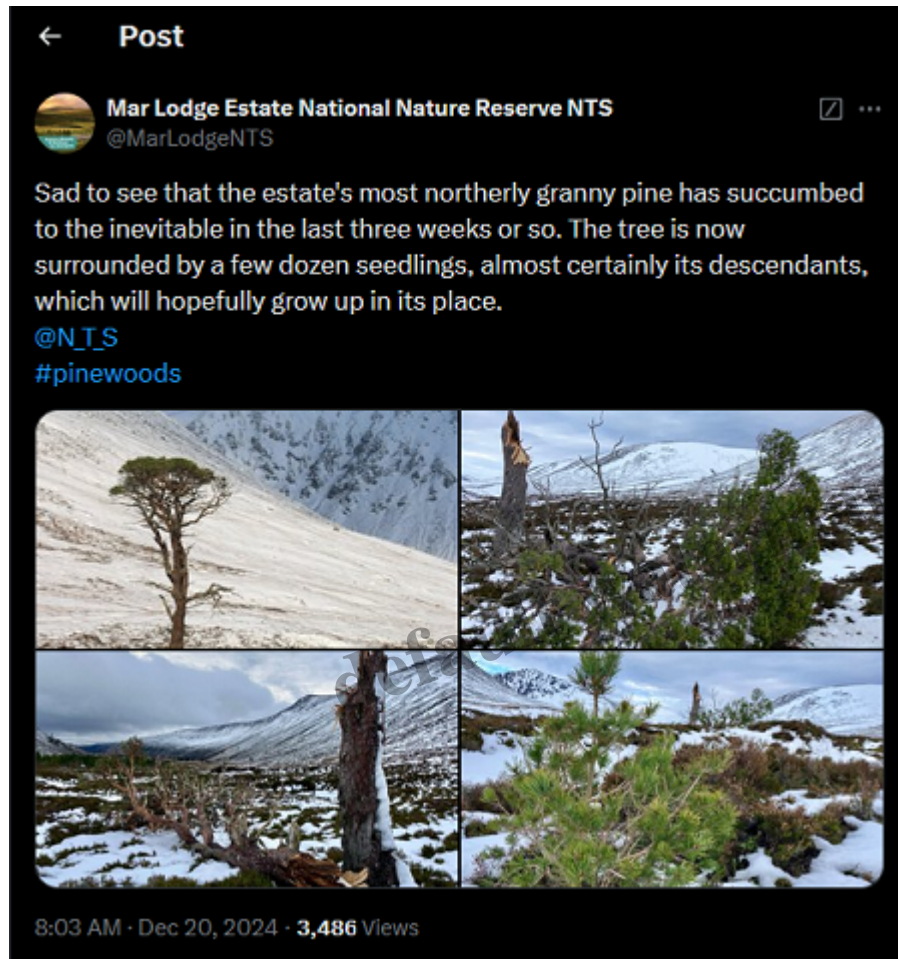


Mar Lodge, native pinewoods and the tree planting is nature restoration narrative

Description



Extract from X. The post was also on Facebook

Early on Xmas Eve staff at Mar Lodge issued this tweet, sad news for a natural landmark but with reasons to be optimistic for the future. By coincidence the campaigner Andy Wightman appears to have written about this very tree in an article for Holyrood Magazine at the end of November ([see here](#)):

“Sitting high on the slopes of Glen Derry in the Cairngorms is a tree. I have walked past it many times over the past few decades. It is a so-called “granny pine”, a Scots pine that stands alone – all that remains of a once more extensive Caledonian pinewood that stretched across large areas of the Highlands.

Recent analysis by St Andrews University has revealed that the tree is one of the oldest in Scotland, dating back to at least 1477. It has lived through the Battle of Flodden, the Union of the Crowns, the Union of Parliaments and the industrial revolution.

For a century or so, this isolated but splendid living thing stood alone as the forest around it slowly died due to over-browsing by high numbers of wild red deer on what was then a prestigious hunting estate belonging to the Duke of Fife.

Now, however, a remarkable transformation is taking place..... in front of the tree born in the 15th century, stand a number of young trees, all naturally seeded and given the chance to grow freely by the reduction in browsing by red deer.”

The Scotsman picked up on Mar Lodge social media post ([see here](#)), adding some further quotes from NTS staff, but without mentioning that it was the reduction in red deer numbers that had finally allowed its seed to get established before it died.

Instead the Scotsman quoted NTS staff on “the importance of our woodland restoration work in the areas around our old woodlands” before informing readers that Mar Lodge:

“has an extensive tree planting initiative underway called the Geldie Woodland Project. It involves planting some 120 hectares on the estate with more than 100,000 native Scots tree species along the banks of the River Geldie”.

The problematic narrative here is how “nature restoration work” is now equated by many people with planting trees with little awareness that if you bring deer numbers down, as in Glen Derry, woodland would recolonise areas and soils where it would occur naturally without the need for any other human intervention.

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Deciduous trees at about 750m on the Glas Allt Mhor above Glen Derry which should regenerate across the hillside if deer numbers are kept below 2 per sq km

That public misunderstanding about nature restoration is made worse when, as in the article, people switch from talking about natural regeneration to planting as if they were the same thing.



New deer fencing on the grassy haughs on the upper reaches of the Geldie in 2023

The tree planting on the Geldie is about 10 miles as the crow flies from the granny pine and what is happening there is totally different, nothing to do with enabling native trees and plants to regenerate naturally by reducing grazing pressure but an attempt to impose new native woodland on the landscape. This is an area which, according to NTS ([see here](#)), “lost most of its native tree cover more than 2000 years ago”, unlike upper Glen Derry where there is a long history of woodland cover, as illustrated by the granny pine.

The planting on the Geldie is in the so-called “moorland” zone of Mar Lodge where deer density is close to 10 per square km (not helped by influxes from Atholl Estate) compared to the 1 per square km NTS aim for in the “regeneration zone” ([see here](#)), hence the need for the fences in the photo above. NTS’ planting – which was partly funded by a Scottish Forestry grant – begs two questions. If this really is a moorland zone why try to change that by planting trees? And if deer density is too high to enable trees to colonise these areas naturally over time, what impact are those grazing levels having on other vegetation and peat bogs?

The elision of two very different processes in public discourse, natural regeneration and planting, and description of both of these as “restoration work” is in my view very dangerous. It serves to conceal the role that overgrazing has played in reducing woodland cover in Scotland and consequently that all we need to do to reverse this is to reduce deer numbers and nature will do the rest ([see here](#)). It also serves to conceal the fact that it is landowning interests, in the form of traditional stalking estates, which is preventing that from happening at present. Hence the battle at Caenlochan involving the Royal Family which has resulted in NatureScot accepting a deer density of 10 per sq km for what was once – like Mar Lodge now is – a National Nature Reserve ([see here](#)).

The fenced enclosures on the Geldie moorland zone of Mar Lodge, which is the part of the estate where field sports are still practised, are no coincidence. It is important to distinguish between what NTS is getting right, its focus on keeping deer density at very low levels in the restoration zone, which

means the granny pine that has recently died will have successors, from what it is still getting wrong. The wider challenge, illustrated by the Scotsman story, is to deconstruct the narrative which is conflating these two very different approaches and as a consequence describes native tree planting, however damaging, as nature restoration and a type of rewilding. Its not.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. conservation
2. Deer
3. forestry
4. NTS
5. rewilding

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