

Transport Scotland, the A9 and how not to expand woodland in Scotland

Description



A section of the A9 central reservation approaching Dalnardocho viewed from a layby on the northbound carriageway 4th January

A few days ago Lesley Riddoch posted some excellent drone footage from Lettoch Films ([see here](#)) of the woodland that has developed in the central reservation of the A9 between Bruar and Drumochter. Most of the trees and other plants have spread there through natural regeneration and were able to do so because of the absence of grazing pressure and muirburn that blights much of the upland areas of Scotland.



Besides the trees many other plants not found on the neighbouring moorland had also colonised the area in 2016 – the Rosebay Willowherb in the foreground is characteristic of disturbed ground. Note the muirburn in the background.

The speed with which trees colonised the area will have been helped by the mineral soils created by the construction of the road but the key point is that the area is evolving into woodland without any human intervention. You can similar examples of this along the edges of roads all over Scotland, particularly but not exclusively where there are deer fences to prevent deer causing accidents.



The central reservation 4th January with the Beauly Denny powerline behind 4th January

The ground disturbed by the construction of the Beauly Denny powerline ten years ago was supposed to be restored to its original state but that never happened despite much of it being supposedly protected under European legislation. That created further areas of mineral soils very favourable to woodland development. Unlike the fenced ground along the A9, however, grazing levels have remained high and suppressed all vegetation growth so woodland has not been able to spread up the hillside ([see here](#)).

The ecological lessons from what has happened along the A9 should be obvious. It is grazing levels that are the crucial factor currently limiting woodland expansion onto suitable soils across Scotland and therefore in areas where grazing levels are very low, like on the central reservation and along the verges of the A9, there is no need to plant trees.

Yet planting trees is exactly what Transport Scotland has been doing all along the new dualled sections of the A9 with a sea of plastic tree tubes now lining the route north of Perth.



Planting by a layby on the more recently dualled section of the A9 between Aviemore and Kingussie
Photo 1st January 2025.

The stupidity of doing so is illustrated by the above photo. The area is completely protected from grazing by large herbivores because of the deer fence (still unmarked despite the area lying well within the dispersal zone of the surviving populations of capercaillie on Speyside). With mature Scots Pine next door, there is an abundant seed source and dozens of self-seeded saplings have already become established along with broom, heather and various tall herbs.

The naturally regenerating Scots Pine are likely to outcompete the broadleaved trees Transport Scotland has paid to have planted in polluting plastic tree tubes. Research ([see here](#)) by the former Forestry Commission has found that: “Evidence from a number of experiments in upland Britain suggests that both Scots pine and Sitka spruce will eventually dominate the broadleaves so that intimately mixed conifer–broadleaved stands are not sustainable over time”. The tree planting, therefore, has been a complete waste of money and unnecessarily added to the carbon emissions and environmental pollution caused by the dualling of the A9.

The layby is a microcosm of a problem that afflicts the whole of Scotland, we are paying to blanket areas with trees where nature would do the job if given a chance and chance would play a far greater role, with some trees colonising some areas quickly, others more slowly and others not at all. The root cause of this failure is that people who manage our public authorities and many of our voluntary organisations are so keen to being seen to be “doing” something for nature that they fork out public money to forestry and landscaping interests without any consideration of what might happen naturally or the consequences, such as plastic entering the environment or birds being killed by deer fences.

As Scottish Ministers are whizzed up the A9 in their chauffeur driven vehicles they should take a look

out of the window and compare the landscape planting to what is happening naturally. Even better, they could stop off at a few layby to take a closer look at what is happening on its verges compared to much of the surrounding land and consider whether we would not do more for the natural environment in Scotland if we reduced grazing pressure and banned muirburn instead of planting trees.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Deer
3. forestry
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