

Kirsty's Young's luxury lodge and the new management plan for Inchconnachan

Description



Inchconnachan viewed from the north with photo annotated to show approx position of the luxury lodge just above the part of the shoreline vulnerable to flooding. Photo credit Helensburgh Advertiser

On Wednesday the Helensburgh Advertiser ran a story stating that Kirsty Young's proposal to build a luxury lodge on Inchconnachan, the island on Loch Lomond best known for its wallabies, had been approved ([see here](#)). While technically correct this was misleading as the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA)'s planning committee approved the development back in December 2023, subject to further plans and the completion of a Section 75 (legally binding) Agreement ([see here](#)).

It has taken the LLTNPA two years to agree the Section 75 Agreement with Kirsty Young and her husband (Mr and Mrs Jones), which they did in October, and then register it. The S75 has now been published on the planning portal along with a "Final Decision Notice" which includes the conditions approved in December 2023 ([see here](#)).

Unlike the S75 Agreement for the Cononish goldmine ([see here](#)), the S75 for Inchconnachan contains no provisions for the area within the Special Area of Conservation where the development is to be located to be restored should it be abandoned at some time in the future. If therefore the new lodge

were to burn down, like the old one, it could be back to planning blight. At least the Decision Notice requires all remains of the old lodge to be removed within three months of the new one being completed. The “demolition work” which the LLTNPA certified had started in March 2023, just before the planning consent to re-build it expired, does not appear to have progressed since. That confirms its purpose was to make it easier for the LLTNPA to approve the new luxury lodge on the basis it was a better location than the other “live” development ([see here](#)).

The proposed management plan for Inchconnachan

The main justification for the LLTNPA allowing the development of a luxury lodge on the shore of an island in a Special Area of Conservation was that the letting income it produced would in effect help to pay for conservation work on the island:

“Reason for the Decision..... The proposed development would result in a small loss of habitat (as justified in the Appropriate Assessment in Appendix 3 of the Report) however the proposals are considered to have a biodiversity benefit through the naturalisation of the former site and the positive management and habitat enhancement of the island.”

To ensure that happened the LLTNPA required Mr and Mrs Jones to produce an Island Management Plan secured by a Section 75 Agreement before any new development commenced. That management plan is included in the S75 and is dated May 2024. The real news, therefore, is not that the development has been given the green light but that information, completed eight months ago, is now available to show how Kirsty Young and her husband plan to manage the island.

The management that has been agreed was produced by EnviroScot and is in many ways very good.

- 1) It proposes to remove non-native trees and plants from the island, with most of the work completed in the first few years and ongoing “weeding” of any self-seeded non-native species after that.
- 2) It proposes that the oak woods, for which the island is designated, should be able to develop through natural regeneration and that will be enabled by a reduction in grazing pressure
- 3) It proposes further consultation on a light-touch approach to visitor management, including camping.
- 4) The job description for the “warden”, which is included in the management plan, is mainly arranging/doing practical conservation work (including removing litter) and engaging with the public. That should be very attractive to those LLTNPA Rangers who are frustrated at having been turned into a quasi police force whose primary purpose is to enforce the camping byelaws.

Table 1: Proposed timeline for delivery of objectives

Objective	Years	1	2	3	4	5
1	Invasive management	Invasive plants to be mapped and removal to begin. Grey squirrel and herbivore management to begin/increase.				Initial eradication complete. Monitor for regrowth
2	Non-native tree removal	Removal of spruce and beech? targeted initially (Zones 1-4). Remove larch where found, to minimise Phytophthora risk.	→	Removal of spruce and beech targeted initially (Zones 5, 10, 11)	Removal of spruce and beech targeted initially (Zones 6-9).	All non-native trees removed. All larch removed.
3	Promote native woodland regeneration including woodland ground flora	Land gained from removal of non-native trees to be encouraged to regenerate native woodland species through herbivore management and ground preparation.				Ongoing herbivore management and other initiatives to be considered to promote tree regeneration such as scarification, bracken control, temporary exclusions from mammals if appropriate.
4	Restoration of wet woodland	Land gained from spruce removal in zones 2, 3, 4 are expected to regenerate in alder and birch naturally.	→	If regeneration of alder and birch is not occurring, collection of island seed can be used to spread into these areas. Review herbivore impacts.	Review zones 8 and 9 for wet woodland actions.	Review herbivore impacts and adjust management requirements
5	Maintain habitat quality and connectivity for otter	Record all other sightings including behaviour. Consider other prior to all planned activities. Maintain features which could be used by otter such as exposed root plates.		Creates opportunities for sheltered nesting sites using felled timber stacks above the high-water mark and not close to areas used by humans.		Conduct passive survey of any created nesting sites.
6	Visitor Management	Consult further with stakeholders.	→	Commitment to specific outcomes and indicators in the NPPP		Review with LLTNP regarding specific pressures and updated strategies.

The S75 and Management Plan document that is currently on the LLTNP planning portal contains a duplicate of each document, the second of which is more legible than the first

The management plan, however, contains some weaknesses and leaves a number of issues unresolved.

The Inchconnachan wallabies

Most importantly, the plan is silent about whether the famous wallabies should have a place in Kirsty Young's desert island close to home ([see here](#)). Its commitment to remove non-native and invasive species extends to animals, like the grey squirrel and the wallaby. But while the plan clearly states that the grey squirrels will be removed it does not say what will happen to the wallabies apart from "herbivore management to begin/increase" (Table 1, point 1 above) and instead refers to the Deer Management Plan (DMP) for the Loch Lomond islands:

Wallaby, considered an invasive species in the context of the island habitats, are currently noted for control within the Deer Management Plan for Loch Lomond Islands¹⁰. It is suggested in the deer management plan that wallaby numbers are managed alongside deer numbers based on their grazing of the woodland habitats, most likely favouring the native deciduous tree species and contributing to designated habitat decline.

That is misleading because the DMP ([see here](#)) only contains one reference to the wallabies which, while informative as to current numbers, does not explain how they will be managed:

“Wallabies

Wallabies are a non-native species and as such careful consideration needs to be given to managing their population. Wallabies are found only on Inchconnachan (although they can swim). They are both grazers and browsers and therefore can cause serious impacts to the flora of Inchconnachan. Since 2008, the wallaby population has reportedly been reduced. The drone count in December 2023 counted between 10-12 wallabies. 12 on an initial fly over, and then 10 on a second pass. These missing 2 wallabies were likely hidden in a crevice. In April 2024 we counted a total of 8 wallabies during our annual drone count.

As far as I am aware there is NO research evidence about the impact that wallabies are having on the flora of Inchconnachan. However, given their small size, their low numbers and the fact that the DMP shows that deer numbers on the Loch Lomond islands are still above 10 per square km, NatureScot's recommended maximum, it is understandable why the DMP contained no actions in relation to the wallabies. In terms of the impact that other herbivores have on woodland, they are hardly an issue but if that is the case why not state that clearly?

There is a strong case to be made for removal of all non-native species from parts of Scotland, including areas designated for conservation, BUT if that is what LLTNPA and NatureScot want they should say so and, given public affection for the wallabies, develop proposals to move them from the island. There is also a case, however, that the presence of wallabies on the island should be tolerated as part of the local cultural heritage so long as their population remains within certain limits. In addition, from an animal welfare perspective an island is arguably a far better place for them than a fenced enclosure elsewhere which would have significant impacts on other wildlife.

This failure to say what it is proposed to do about the wallabies on the island is in my view unacceptable. That, however, is not primarily the fault of Mr and Mrs Jones but a consequence of the LLTNPA and NatureScot, who have the power to determine what goes into the management plan and who have not been prepared to engage the public about the future of the wallabies or reveal their real intentions. Perhaps they are just hoping the wallabies will die out naturally but again, if that is the case, why not say so?

The confusion in the management plan about native trees

A further weakness is the plan is its treatment of beech and larch. Beech reached what is now southern England before Britain became an island and research from Stirling in 2017 ([see here](#)) showed that beech planted in Scotland came from British stock. As a consequence the argument is that beech would have reached Scotland naturally by now, if it has not actually done so, and therefore that it should be treated as a native species.

While Scottish Forestry is still swithering about this issue ([see here](#)), NatureScot apparently continues to regard beech as an invasive species damaging to nature conservation interests ([see here](#)). The conservation guddle is illustrated by the fact that there are beechwoods down in England which are designated Special Areas of Conservation ([see here](#)) just like Inchconnachan!

Despite NatureScot publicly apologising for its failure to consult on the poisoning of the beech trees on Inchtavannach in 2019 ([see here](#)) there has been no public consultation about the plans to remove beech trees from Inchconnachan:

Once complete, it is suggested that the removal of spruce and other non-native species such as beech, is conducted in a north-south fashion, with follow-up monitoring behind the operations to pull seedlings annually. Where small scale removal occurs (organised by the warden) trees may be ring barked or felled and left to provide deadwood habitat for a range of saprotrophic organisms. Where small groups of spruce occur, the material may be formed into small natural deadwood fencing enclosures^{??} to exclude deer/wallabies from applying grazing pressure.

Larch will be removed where found in order to contribute to the control of Phytophthora in the national park. Following completion of zones 1 and 2, a wider woodland removal plan shall be formulated for the remainder of the island.

It is likely that non-native seedling pulling will be a very long term habitat management action, but hopefully reducing in number annually.

Extract from management plan

Unlike beech, European larch never arrived in Britain before it became an island but was introduced, like Japanese larch with which it hybridises. Despite this, the reason given in the management plan for removing larch from Inchconnachan is not that it is non-native but that it could help spread the disease caused by phytophthora ramorum. That might be an additional reason for removing the larch but should not be the main reason for doing so: it reinforces the argument that both the LLTNPA and NatureScot need to sort out their approach to native and non-native species.

The problem underlying this contradictory approach to conservation is our designation system which is designed to protect specific features of conservation interest rather than promote natural processes and re-wilding. As a result our public agencies tend to try and keep nature in aspic, with a bit of gardening round the edges: In the case of Inchconnachan this means the focus is on the oak woods, which are of fairly recent origin and a product of the time when coppicing played a major part in the economy, and not the potential woodland assemblage.

While the Inchconnachan management plan commits to natural regeneration rather than planting, which is welcome, the expectation is that this should result not just in the oak wood regenerating but in it covering the whole of the island. To try and ensure that happens the management plan allows for “ground preparation” (Table 1 above) such as cutting bracken to allow oak saplings to grow more easily. The problem is that no gardener can disregard nature completely as the plan acknowledges:

- It is possible that some of the open spaces, created perhaps by quarrying, will struggle to develop forest canopy due to soil structure, drainage and persistent dense bracken layer. If this is the case then accepting forest regeneration at the edges and aiming to promote diverse flora which perhaps favour open areas may become the achievable objective.

If we really want to restore nature, our public agencies and the people advising them need to start acknowledging that natural processes will not necessarily deliver their vision for the landscape – in this case a complete forest canopy – but that habitats will evolve over time sometimes with unexpected

consequences.

What needs to happen

While Kirsty Young and her husband should not delay on proceeding with the uncontroversial bits of the management plan for Inchconnachan (like removal of sitka and rhododendron from the island and reducing deer numbers), they would be wise to engage with the public about their plans for the wallabies and beech trees before, in the light of that, clarifying exactly what they intend to do and amending the plan accordingly.

Postscript

There is also an article in the Scottish National today ([see here](#)) in which I was pleased to be quoted in which a spokesperson for the LLTNPA claims they don't intend to remove the wallabies. If that is the case why did their planners NOT ensure this was clearly stated in the S75 Agreement?

Category

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