

## Muirburn, people and the recent 'wildfires' on the wild west of Scotland

### Description



Photo credit Jo Swann

Three weeks ago I described the enormous wildfire which burned Morar, the area of land south of the Knoydart peninsular and west of Mallaig, between 2nd and 5th April ([see here](#)). I referred to the history of such fires in the area and explained how although almost everyone in the local community knows who is responsible, they have never been held to account for their actions. My post was read by Jo Swann, who was on holiday in the area the following week and sent me three photos with the following commentary:

*'On the 10th, 11th and 12th of April, I was out walking near Loch Morar [i.e during the period when there was a warning of very high fire risk]. On the 10th it was a warm day and I walked up the footpath from Bracorina [the road end on the north side of Loch Morar] to Lochan Innis Eanruig [a hill loch]. The upland peat bogs were amazingly dry for the time of year. There was lots of recently burned blackened patches by the footpath, but I wasn't sure whether it was wildfires or not.'*

2 days later, on the 12th, I walked along the footpath from Bracorina towards Tarbert. On a hill with the remains of an old settlement, I scrambled down and explored the headland and shores around it. The weather had changed, it was cooler with quite a strong westerly wind. On my way back up, I smelled smoke, and there were several fires burning on the hillside. I was a bit alarmed because the ground was so dry and it was windy. I wasn't sure how safe it was for me to be there. Another hiking couple said there were lots more fires further back down and close to the path, and that I should take care on my return. The air was quite thick with smoke, and at one point, there was fire next to me on my right and then a very sheer drop down to the loch on my left, with no escape possible if needed. •



Same crag, different angle. Photo credit Jo Swann.

It wasn't just the heather that was burning, it was also under the old oak trees and had charred their trunks, and I watched the fire consume a patch of silver Birch saplings too. When I got down to the shoreline, another walking couple were looking up at the flames, and had decided not to continue their walk any further, for fear the flames might get whipped out of control.



Note the bracken covered ground. Photo credit Jo Swann.

*â??There was no way this was a wildfire as it was many seperate patches of fire. We all thought it was probably farmers burning for better pasture land. But it seemed totally crazy to do it in such dry, windy conditions. and there didnâ??t seem to be anyone around monitoring the fires or controlling themâ?•.*

What this shows beyond any reasonable doubt is that these fires were deliberate, i.e muirburn, and the person/s responsible had set fire to the land despite what had happened in the area the previous week. It is also appears that no-one was supervising the fires when the current Muirburn Code says a minimum of three people should do so and its advice to â??consider preparing warning/interpretation signsâ?• were ignored. Whatever you think about burning the trees, most normal people would also call that reckless.

Unfortunately, the advice in the proposed new code recently consulted on by NatureScot ([see here](#)) is weaker in terms of the number of people required on site to carry out the muirburn and includes the same advice for warning signs:

People preparations	Identify sufficient people to carry out the muirburn. Consider first aid training and requirements.
Warning notices	If burning is planned close to popular areas for public access, consider preparing warning / interpretation signs.

Its standard practice for the forest industry to put up warning signs for tree felling so why is that not also the case for muirburn? Better still, since the Scottish Parliament is not yet ready to ban Muirburn completely, at least ban it near paths.

As for farmers burning for better pasture, I think Jo was right, that may have the intention but unfortunately the person/s responsible for setting fire to the woodland had little understanding of ecology or how to improve land for grazing:

*Burning is not a method of bracken treatment and may encourage bracken growth by recycling nutrients and suppressing vegetation which would otherwise compete with bracken.*

(UK Best Practice Guidance on Bracken Management)

It will come as little surprise to anyone who has been following the saga of the new Muirburn Code that NatureScot's proposed advice on bracken is weaker than the UK Best Practice Guidance, merely stating burning is likely to promote bracken expansion. As a result it is likely to be ignored, to the detriment of farmers and crofters and the natural environment.

[Footnote: I thought I had published this post a week ago prior to heading north but failed to press the right button. I have edited the post slightly to reflect the fact the NatureScot's consultation on the Muirburn Code closed yesterday]

### Category

1. Other parts Scotland

### Tags

1. muirburn
2. Tourism
3. visitor management

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