

Wild Places need the John Muir Trust more than ever

Description



Woodland understory coming through on John Muir Trust land, Knoydart. Photo credit JMT.

In his article, “Does Scotland Need the John Muir Trust?” ([see here](#)), Victor Clements asks: “if the John Muir Trust didn’t exist, would we miss them?” His existential question is relevant for any environmental charity, and it is one that I welcome.

In recent months, there has been no shortage of commentary about the John Muir Trust. Some of that is understandable, in light of our commitment to restore native woodlands and our recent financial challenges, some of it biased, and some based on misunderstandings.

Leading change is no easy task, and we must all welcome close critique and improve where we can. We are listening and seek to improve, we aspire to being open about what needs to change and setting out how we will move forward. That is the spirit in which I write today.

Let me start with the most important truth, the John Muir Trust is the only charity in the UK dedicated solely to protecting Wild Places. Our focus is on natural processes and natural landscapes. Curiously there is no designation in the UK that places natural processes and natural landscape at the core, the Trust intends to change that. The UK's land is full of diversity, and we believe there is a case for adding to this mosaic of areas protected for the intrinsic value for nature. This is a well-known and understood omission, and we intend to change that.

There has been confusion, sometimes intentional, about Wild Places and Wild Land. Wild Land is defined around the concept of remote, natural and rugged. These became a consideration in planning with the publication of NatureScot's Wild Land Areas map in 2014, as contained in the National Planning Framework 3 (NPF3), which identified 42 Wild Land Areas. The Scottish Government rolled back on that commitment in 2023 with National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). We are now seeing the creep of industrialisation into some of Scotland's most renowned landscapes. This is a change driven by the massive profits made by multinationals with questionable benefit to the people who live there.

Wild Places by contrast place the focus on land held for future generations being protected from the vagaries of changing government policies and ownership. These are areas where natural processes and natural landscapes are given priority for their intrinsic value, and where Wild Place qualities can be measured and management action taken to improve them over time.

The changing fortunes of the Wild Land concept clearly demonstrates the fragility of nature when faced with economic drivers. Wild Places across the UK face the same challenges and are being lost through steady attrition.

For the Trust, a Wild Place has three essential components:

1. The freedom of **natural processes** where nature is allowed to function, supported by management where the past actions of humans have detracted from the landscapes or natural processes.
2. The promotion of **natural landscapes**, shaped by physical and ecological forces, not economic incentives and interests.
3. An ownership structure that **protects these values in perpetuity**, as far as the law allows.

As a charity our sole purpose is to champion the value of these places and to work with public, private and third sector organisations as a team to protect them for future generations.

It is a curious anomaly in nature conservation that Wild Places fall through the cracks of existing protections. Our system of SSSIs, SACs and SPAs safeguard mosaics and features of interests, however, they do not recognise the intrinsic value of natural processes and natural landscapes.

That is the gap the John Muir Trust exists to close.

Driving change

Providing leadership requires a clear set of objectives and the determination to deliver, but it also requires humility, and the ability to listen to feedback and act upon it. No charity with real ambition gets everything right, and that includes us. We have faced challenges in our finances, in relationships, and in how our work has been perceived locally and nationally. Some criticism has reflected misunderstandings, while some has reflected concerns we needed to hear. That feedback has been heard and our priorities from 2025 are responding to that. We have already re-launched the John Muir Award and started to rebuild relationships with communities and partners. That hasn't been about compromising on our ambition, it is more about recognising that we need to work harder to explain why we are making these choices. Next year this will continue in all aspects of the Trust's work, including through a programme of land stewardship plans.

Our work is steered by a deeply committed Board of Trustees, strong public support, and a staff team whose passion for Wild Places is unwavering. Their dedication deserves clarity of purpose and confidence of direction from leadership, and I am striving to ensure they have both.

Turning the page

Our focus is not on defending the Trust as an institution for its own sake, it is on protecting Wild Places. Ultimately, our job will be done when there is a recognised network of Wild Places across the UK, accessible to all, protected in perpetuity, and resourced well enough that their core qualities are secure for generations to come.

To achieve this, we must work with others in the public, private, and third sectors. We welcome conversations with any landowner willing to take on the responsibilities that come with protecting natural processes: deer management, invasive species control, path upkeep, interpretation, and long-term stewardship for natural processes.

Private property rights are at the core of decisions taken on land management. The manmade landscapes of the UK have been shaped by public policy, economics and the exercising of private property rights by owners with a range of objectives, we respect that. We also acknowledge that land-owning environmental organisations own land for a multitude of different reasons. Land is held with trading arms to help generate revenue, it is used for the purposes of engagement, to protect key species and habitats, and to celebrate the freedom of nature and natural landscapes.

Some people will seek to argue that deer sporting estates, grouse moors, and Woodland Grant Schemes (WGS) are Wild Places. To them they may well be, they simply have a different definition. The problem comes when they use their definition to claim ownership of the intrinsic quality of Wild Places, hiding the fact that these areas are fast disappearing from the UK's landscape - eaten up by the human desire to place profit above nature.

Victor intimates that others could manage Trust land and this is of course true - the question is for whom and to what purpose? If an estate wishes to champion sporting interests, that is its right - it does not make it a Wild Place. A grouse moor, a plantation forest, or a deer estate may each have its own value - they are not Wild Places as we define them. The debate becomes distorted when different definitions are blurred together to diminish the intrinsic value of true wildness.

Looking forward

The John Muir Trust exists to protect Wild Places, these places are finite, the UK has precious few, and we believe they are a valuable resource in the UK's mosaic of land use. They speak to something deep in us - a recognition that nature has worth beyond profit, that landscapes shaped by wind, water, and time are as essential to our identity as any built heritage.

Driving change in land management has never been easy. If it were, it would have happened decades ago. We now have a moment of real opportunity: public support, ecological urgency, and a growing appetite for landscapes that puts natural processes first - with a legal and policy framework which is forcing all of us who manage land to think about why we do this and what our objectives are.

We are purposeful. We are learning, improving, and committed to rebuilding trust where needed. Most importantly, we remain absolutely dedicated to the idea that Wild Places deserve a place in the UK landscape and in UK policy.

This work is bigger than us. It always has been. We are proud of our role in it and determined to improve our impact every year.

The John Muir Trust will continue to protect Wild Places because their intrinsic value is at the heart of who we are and why we exist. We will continue to work closely with communities, welcome honest debate, especially from those willing to help secure a lasting future for Wild Places and live in harmony with them

I welcome discussion about the challenges of protecting Wild Places and would be happy to speak to any audience interested in helping us further this objective.

[Ed note: David Balharry is CEO of JMT and I welcome his response to Victor Clements post. I hope they will open up a wider debate not just about JMT but about the management of wild land and wild places.]

Category

1. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. conservation
2. Deer
3. wild land

Date Created

November 15, 2025

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