

Forestry grants, tree planting and native woodland (2) - the Altan scheme by Loch Glascarnoch

Description

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View north west over deer lick and the Altan native woodland. The A835 is visible behind with Beinn

I have been meaning to write about the Altan native woodland scheme, just to the south west of Loch Glascarnoch, since I through it in 2018 and 2021. Many hillwalkers will have used the track through the scheme which provides the quickest access to the eastern end of the Fannichs and the Corbett, Beinn Liath Mor a Ghuibhais Li (the big grey hill of the coloured pines). But its also possible to view from the road and an easy walk for anyone who wishes to see for themselves the fate of many of Scotland's native woodlands planted in the 1990s.



View to the car parking area by the Abhainn a Ghuibhais Li (River of the coloured pines) another placename which shows this area was once more wooded than it is now. Photo June 2021.

The entrance to the plantation from the A835 is misleading. The gate and section of fence at the southern end of the track were removed long ago (see below). One reason for retaining the gate and fence on the north side may have been to make it harder for red deer to wander onto the road. An estimated average 1,850 collisions between vehicles and deer have taken place in Scotland every year since 2016 ([see here](#)).



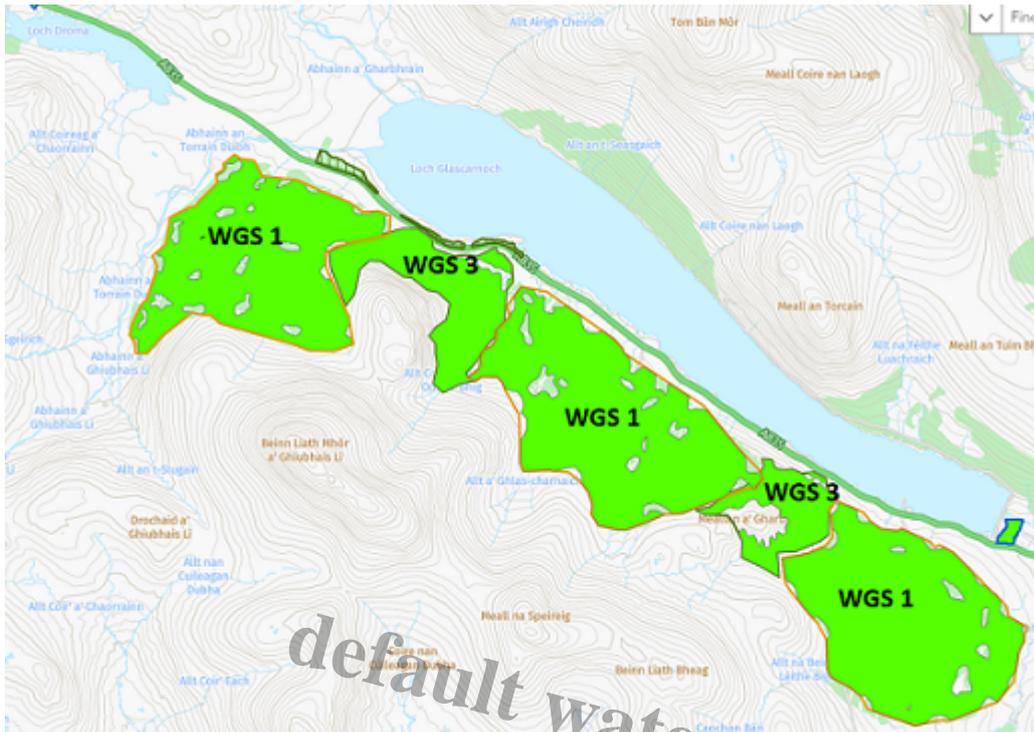
Dead deciduous sticks and two surviving deciduous trees in front of closely planted Scots Pine. Photo 2021.

Walking up the track it soon became apparent that many of the planted trees had died.



More dead sticks and a few surviving deciduous trees scattered among what appeared to be mostly dead heather. Photo June 2021.

The Scottish Forestry map viewer shows there were five separate "woodlands" planted along the south shore of Loch Glascarnoch and, funded by the Woodland Grant Schemes (WGS) ([see here](#)) 1998-2004:



The Altan scheme featured in this post is the left hand WGS1 Scheme

I can find little trace of the two WGS 3 schemes, which appear intended to fill in the gaps between the earlier WGS 1 schemes, on more recent maps.

Scottish Forestry's Map Viewer shows the Altan WGS was approved in 1990, covered a total area of 242.5 ha of which 222.8 ha was planted:

WGS 1		
LOCHLUICHART ESTATE 4 (ALTAN)		
Feature Description	Property Number	Property Name
Approved f...	5150038	LOCHLUICH...
Property Type	Plan Status	Date Approved
Traditional ...	Approved	16/02/1990
Nat Grid Ref	Restocking Area	New Planting Area
NH276730	0	222.8
Total Area	Area	
242.5	233.83ha	

Had the Altan WGS been successful, most of the bare ground in the photos above would now be covered not only by trees but by further species forming a woodland understorey.



Dead tree in bog with signs of "ground preparation".
Photo December 30th 2018

Some of the planted trees appear to have died because they were planted in the wrong place.

As several photos in this post show, however, a significant proportion of the area is grassy, an indication of better drained and mineral soils more suitable for trees.



Ring barked birch, with no lower branches, showing how even well established deciduous trees are vulnerable to deer. Photo December 2018.

The main reason so many of the planted trees had died was obvious from the ones that still survived – too many deer.



An illustration of how trees have been killed off one by one. Photo June 2021

This process, in which the Altan WGS has been gradually destroyed by deer, continues. There were at the time of my last visit very few deciduous trees left for them to eat (I would expect more to have died since then).

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Missing gate and fence at southern end of track. Photo June 2021.

The reason deer got into the enclosure does not appear to have been an "accident" or a failure to maintain fences but a deliberate decision. The Altan WGS appears to be another example, like Glen Shiel, ([see here](#)), where the landowner decided to open up this native woodland, funded by the public, to provide food and shelter for deer.



Deer lick within an area of Scots Pine "attracting deer here is a sure way to prevent the pines from regenerating. Photo December 2018.

The deer licks show the landowner/manager was deliberately encouraging into the plantation. An interesting question is whether that was always their intention and whether the Altan native woodland planted, funded by public money, was doomed from the start. In order to try and ascertain further how far the landowner had been using the WGS for its own purposes, I submitted a Freedom of Information request on 4th June 2023 to Scottish Forestry asking for the documentation they held about the purpose of the scheme, how much it cost and the contractual obligations of the landowner. Scottish Forestry replied promptly on 8th June saying they did not hold any of the information:

The exception which applies is Regulation 10(4)(a), information not held. This exception is because some of the information requested was not held by Scottish Forestry at the time of the request, as noted below.

a) whether [the area] was planted with any financial assistance from the Forestry Commission (as it then was)

We have searched our records and can confirm that the K-shaped area on your screenshots of Loch Glascarnogh at its west end and bordered by Abhainn a' Ghiubhais to the west was the subject of an application under the then iteration of the Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) with the name "Lochliuchart Estate 4 (Altan)".

The application was approved by the Forestry Commission on 16th February 1990. The scheme consisted of 222.8 hectares of new planting and the total scheme area was 242.5 hectares.

Screenshots of the grant record are attached.

The screenshots of the grant record are the information that remains on the data base used to populate the Scottish Forestry Map viewer (and which I have shown above).

Scottish Forestry's response goes on to explain why they did not hold the information - all the documentation about this WGS scheme has been destroyed:

b) if so, provide the information you hold on how much grant assistance was provided over what years and for what?

c) any conditions attached to the provision of financial assistance

The WGS-1 application and recording process was paper-based. Our records indicate that the file on the scheme was closed on 27th September 2001 and destroyed, we assume in accordance with the Forestry Commission's record management policies, on 31st March 2010. We searched our other records, including our database of grant payments, and we do not hold any further information beyond the existence of the grant application as noted above.

We therefore do not hold information on the amount of grant assistance provided or its purpose beyond it being under the Woodland Grant Scheme. Additional contract conditions will have expired when the contract ended and are unknown as the contract has been destroyed.

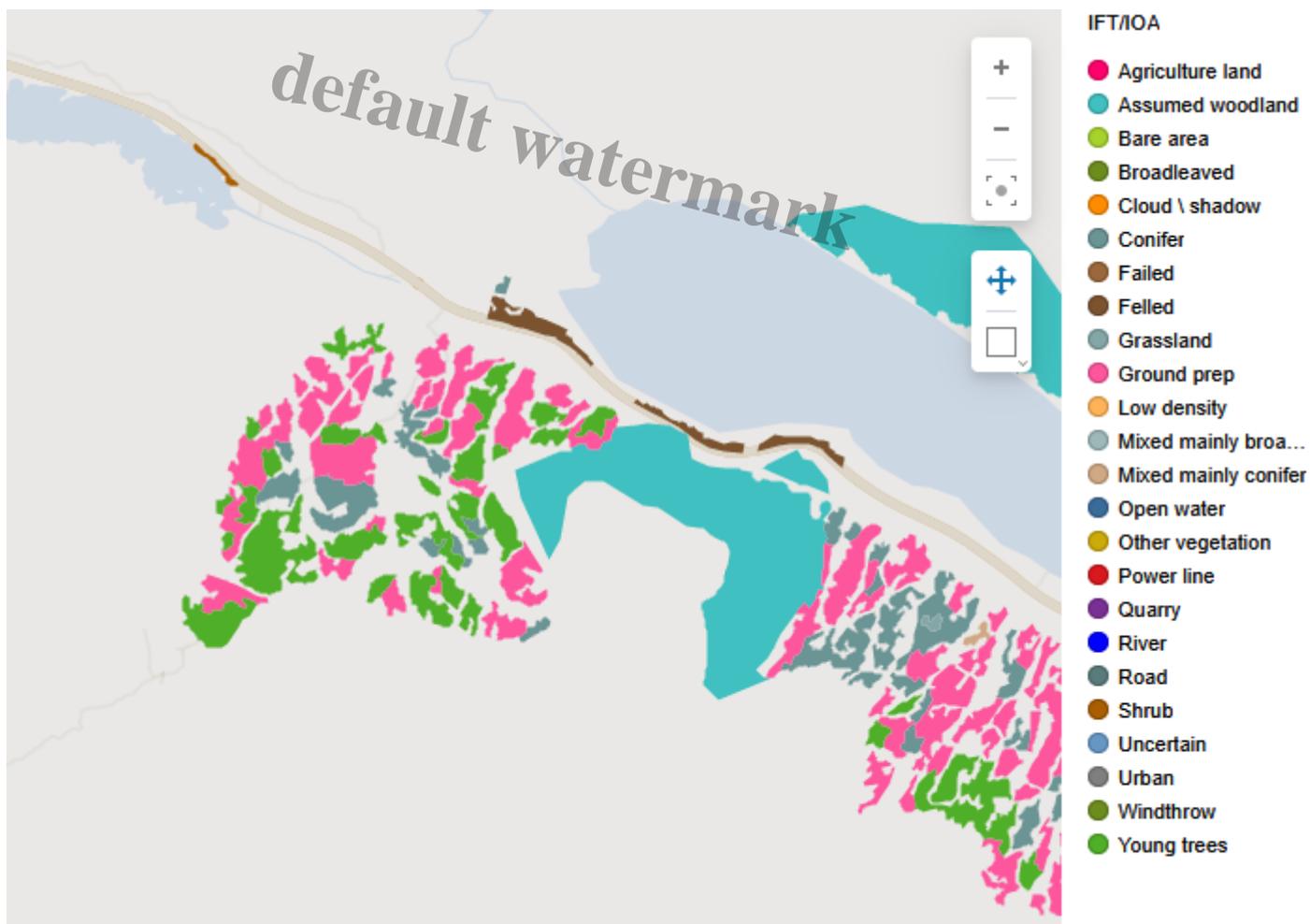
As I found out accidentally afterwards, the Scottish Government published this FOI response nine months later ([see here](#)). I have been meaning to submit another FOI asking Scottish Forestry if they hold this information about ANY of the WGS schemes 1998-2004 - I suspect not and that the Forestry Commission destroyed all their records.

Without the documentary evidence, no-one, whether politician, civil servant, researcher, local resident or interested member of the public, can find out the ostensible purpose of individual woodlands

â??createdâ?• under the WGS schemes or show whether this was wise use of public money. What is particularly alarming is that Scottish Forestry and its predecessors appear to have no interest in finding out whether historic woodland grant schemes (which they describe as â??legacy schemesâ?•) made any difference, let alone what they should learn from their past mistakes.

Instead, Scottish Forestry continues to fork out public money to large and often very rich landowners to meet Scottish Government planting targets, claiming that this helps nature and help offset carbon emissions. Whether those trees survive or whether proper woodland â?? where trees and shrubs regenerate naturally â?? develops appears of no concern to Scottish Forestry.

That raises the political question whether using forestry grants to plant native trees has done anything to restore nature in the last 30 years or whether, because landowners have used the public money to provide food and shelter for deer, it has contributed to the continued decline in the state of nature in Scotland ([see here](#))?



Extract from Scotland's Environment Viewer

While Scottish Forestry claim that all their records have been destroyed, Scotland's Environment Viewer provides some further details about the Altan Scheme and its neighbouring WGS 3 scheme. The neighbouring scheme is described as â??Assumed Woodlandâ?• which begs a number of questions. The pink shows â??ground prepâ?•, potentially areas where it was intended to plant on deep peat, the light green areas where broadleaves were planted and the dark green areas where conifers

were planted.

This raises more questions about the value of the legacy WGS schemes. For example could the data behind the Environment Viewer be used to calculate how much of the native woodland planting in the 1990s was on deep peat which was then dug up to help the trees grow?

The first thing the Scottish Government needs to do, however, is to instruct Scottish Forestry that it is no to destroy any more records about historic forestry grants schemes so their impacts can be properly assessed by researchers.

Category

1. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. Deer
2. forestry
3. landed estates
4. scottish forestry

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