

Muirburn on Morar â?? why do our public authorities allow this?

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Muirburn at the east end of Loch Morar at 13.45 on 25th April

Walking in to Oban bothy over Meith Bheinn from Lochailort on Friday afternoon I did not know that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service had issued a warning of extreme risk of wildfire for the West of Scotland ([see here](#)). Although squelching over the lower ground, higher up it was very dry underfoot. I had been in the Morar area a few days earlier and it was amazing the difference a few days of sunshine and wind had made after the very wet start to the year.



Smoke just visible centre behind An Stac with the Skye Cuillin on the horizon behind

Saturday was a fantastic day but there had been a few small clouds over Loch Arkaig and when I glimpsed a puff of white behind An Stac I gave it no further thought. Thirty minutes later I turned again to see the lines of fire in the top photo spreading out and up the hillside on the north side of Loch Morar.

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The Highlands ablaze on 5th April. View south across Loch Nevis from Meall Bhuidhe on Knoydart, I

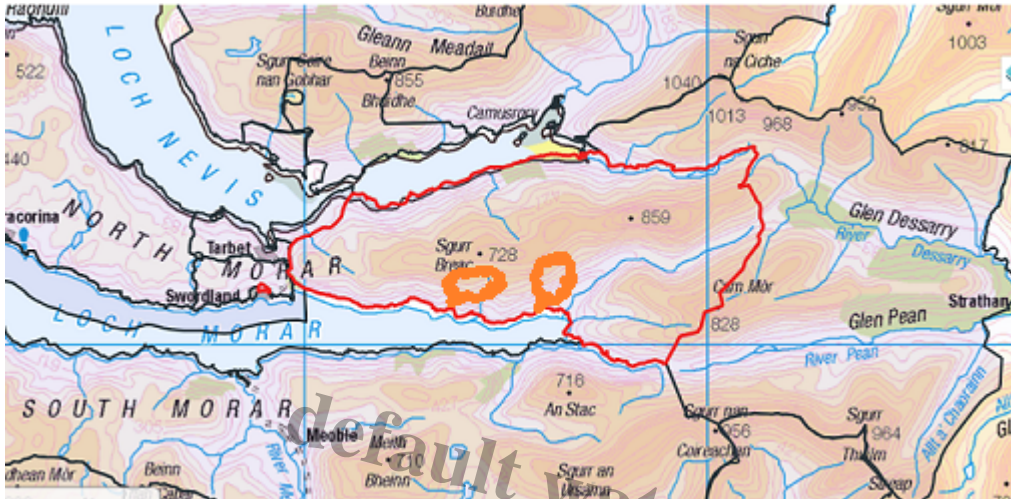
Last year out of control muirburn on North Morar ([see here](#)) and ([see here](#)) had burned for three days between 2nd and 5th April. The wet start to this year has meant those responsible have not been able to set the hillsides aflame so early. Forced to delay, this muirburn was outside the prescribed season which ends on 15th April but can be extended to 30th April with the permission of the landowner. The Scottish Government has not encouraged this, as there are increased risks to ground-nesting birds in late April. It has, however, delayed implementing the provisions in the Wildlife Management and Moorland (Scotland) Act 2024 that would make muirburn unlawful after 1st April for another year.

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Two separate fires visible below the ridge which rises to over 700m. Neither fire could have been seen from the road.

According to Who Owns Scotland the owners of the North Morar Deer Forest are the Trustees under Settlement between Ian RS Bond, Caroline L Bond & Harry PS Bond. It would be interesting to know if they authorised these two fires or not.



North Morar Deer Forest with the orange showing the approximate sites of the two fires. Map Credit Andy Wightman Who Owns Scotland

If not, those lighting these fires would be guilty of committing a criminal offence with a potential fine of £5,000.

In my view deliberately lighting fires at times of high fire risk should be subject to criminal prosecution anyway. As the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) Head of Prevention and Scottish Wildfire Forum Chair, Deputy Assistant Chief Officer Kenny Barbour, said put it in their news release:

Wildfires have the potential to destroy property, landscapes and wildlife, which is why it is so important that members of the public use extreme caution under these conditions.

The SFRS extreme fire risk warning is notable because, once again, it is only directed towards the general public and not those who manage areas like Morar.



This photo suggests there may have been more than two fires. The Skye and Rum Cuillin both for a time completely disappeared behind the smoke

Four hours later I was on the summit of Sgurr Thuilm and the nearer fire appeared to have reached the top of the ridge on Sgurr Breac (728m). The Muirburn Code says this about â??Summits, ridges and other areas very exposed to the windâ??:

- *â??These areas should not be burnt, as vegetation is kept short by high winds (wind-clipped); burning has no benefit and risks removing vegetation cover, leading to erosion.*
- *These conditions are most likely to occur:*
 - *Above 300 m in the north-west,â??*

I caught a few whiffs of the smoke as it spread down Glen Pean but the main pall of smoke was spreading north towards Knoydart. I felt very sorry for people stopping off at Sourlies, the popular halt for walkers of the Cape Wrath Trail, as I guessed they would be enveloped in smoke. It is also criminal offence to create smoke that is a nuisance.

The next day, further east on Streap, I could see no signs of smoke. It seems likely the fires burned themselves out when they reached the ridge as generally they spread more easily uphill than down.

The impact of muirburn in North Morar

A few days earlier, on a separate trip, I had walked up Carn â?? Ghobhlair, the prominent hill at the other end of North Morar behind Mallaig. This was on land that is owned by Nevis Estates Ltd and

crofted. Close to the road the moorland was being invaded by rhododendron but after that much of it had been burned:



Some patches of heather and birch trees which had survived the recent muirburn and give an indication of what the natural landscape might look like it not burned.

We used a couple of long rakes to thread our way up the rocky west face:



The first rake at the top of which another rake slanted up to the right

Much of the face had been burned not so long ago and the ground was a lot wetter than I found it a few days later.



The specks of green regenerating to the right of the boulder are heath rush, an important bog forming plant

It probably would have been wetter still if so much moisture retaining vegetation had not been incinerated.



Note the contrast between the areas of rock where lichens have survived and those that were burned which have a much cleaner appearance

The impact of fire on vegetation was greatest along the rocky sides of the rake where fire had burned lichens off boulders and exposed the underlying soils.



These areas of soil exposed by the fire are now prone to erosion by water and, where peaty, to oxidisation.

As the SFRS said in 2021 when commenting on another fire in Morar ([see here](#)):

“These fires can also have a hugely negative impact on the environment and the release of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere.”

All this destruction so a few more sheep can be grazed on the land

Muirburn and crofting – the political problem

From an environmental perspective, burning the natural environment to improve grazing for sheep or deer is highly destructive.

The fire I witnessed on 25th April could have been intended to improve grazing for either sheep or deer – I have been unable to establish if any of the land in the North Morar Deer Forest is subject to common grazings or not. Whatever the case once the Muirburn Licensing scheme is implemented, it will no longer be lawful to burn for deer. That will be half the problem solved.



Muirburn on the east face of Carn aâ?? Ghoblair had produced more grass for grazing

That leaves the question of burning by crofters to â??improveâ?? common grazings. .Even on the better ground, the number of sheep that can be supported through burning is not great. The problem is that to the crofters sheep represent a source an income, there are no alternative means of earning a living from the land and therefore every extra sheep counts. The crofters have little choice about what they do, unlike the very rich people who burn the land so they can shoot more grouse.



Objectively the cost to the natural environment and society of muirburn is very high but to a crofters it can be a lifeline

This helps explain why parts of the West of Scotland, like Morar, are like the wild west when it comes to muirburn. It also helps explain why local people are so reluctant to complain and why public authorities are so reluctant to take any action to stop this destructive activity even when it is clearly unlawful. No-one wants to be accused as being responsible for new clearances. The result is that most fires caused by land managers on the west are unreported unlike those caused by the general public.

The precarious position of crofters may also help explain why in 2007 those on North Morar refused Cameron Mackintosh's offer to sell much of the land he owned through Nevis Estates to them ([see here](#)) while later opposing his application to "resume" some of the crofting land to expand native woodland ([see here](#)). If the only potential source of income from the land is sheep, there is no point owning it but also any lost grazing means lost income.

In theory carbon offsetting could now provide crofters an alternative source of income to sheep and help stop the burning. Relying on markets to do that however is not the sort of risk that those dependent on the land wish to take. They need greater security than that, a guarantee from the state of future income for managing the land in a more sustainable way. That requires land reform. Unless and until that happens, either the Muirburn Code will continue to be flouted on parts of the west coast or there will be major political fall-out as enforcement action is taken against people who have little choice.

Category

1. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. landed estates
2. muirburn
3. natural environment
4. Scottish Government

Date Created

April 28, 2026

Author

nickkempe

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