

The Cairngorms wildfire and pinewood recovery- PART 2

Description

A previous article on this ([see here](#)) created a significant level of interest and useful feedback, including from BBC Rado Scotland Drivetime and Radio 4 researchers.

The message from the post above was that the pinewoods will grow back. The recovery may not be uniform, and there may well be areas of contraction or wider environmental degradation, but it is quite likely that much of the burned area may regenerate back better than it was before. Both pinewoods and heather moorland have evolved to cope with fire, and indeed, it is an essential tool in achieving their renewal.

But what to do between now and then until that happens?

In the very short term, after the fire is finally out, there is no doubt that the amenity of the area will have been very severely impacted, but as time goes by, and vegetation starts to come in again, that process will in itself be interesting to people. So, it is important to COMMUNICATE what is going on and to make a priority of doing this. Any dead or damaged trees near paths will need to be felled and made SAFE.

Beyond this, nature should be left to take its course, and people should not be spending money on little projects designed to make it look as though they are doing something. Maintaining deer levels at or around their current levels should allow recovery to take place, albeit with a bit of refocusing of effort as required when things start to grow. Then, allow for TIME to do its work.

The priority management consideration is in making sure all this simply cannot be repeated again in another 20-30 years. If the pinewoods are the signature habitats of the area, then regenerating them is inevitably going to allow the fuel load to increase again. We cannot deny them their right to exist, but we have to accept the hazard that we are creating as they develop. What we can do is divide them up in to management blocks that are separated by appropriate fire breaks, so that if an area burns again, the extent of the fire can be restricted to a few hundred hectares at maximum, and that we do not see big 2500- 3000 ha fires as we did this time. We were lucky it was not much bigger.

Many people looking at the most recent fires acknowledge that this could have been much worse. The wind direction could have been different, and we got rain at key times. This is simply down to luck. It was also the case that while it was burning, that this was the only significant wildfire in Scotland. If we had multiple fires in different locations around the country, it would have been much more difficult to deal with. It could have been the case that helicopter priority was needed elsewhere. Eg If houses were at more immediate risk. We cannot assume that the Cairngorms would take priority over somewhere else.

The surprise that arose to me from this fire is that in the Cairngorms Connect area which defines the core of the park, you have Scotland's largest landowner (FLS, also our best resourced public landowner), Scotland's largest private landowner, one of Scotland's largest and richest NGOs

(RSPB) and the regulator, NatureScot, also owning land there. You also have the UK's largest national park, overseen by an authority who see land management and woodland regeneration as being core to their very being. And yet, the co-ordinated response was poor. Obviously, people got there in the end and we thank them for that, but managers were not ready for this, and that has been exposed very effectively and brutally. Fire is brutal. It does not care about your opinions or feelings, or your hopes and aspirations. Fire will take everything you present to it. There is no sentiment about it. It must be recognized as a dangerous threat.

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Shorter heather at least gives you a chance to do something, even if it is not perfect. Photo credit Vi

Fire breaks are areas that are wide enough to either prevent a fire from crossing, or where the vegetation is short enough so that a fire can realistically be controlled, or where staff can access quickly to back burn in to. Such areas can be maintained by burning, swiping or grazing. Obviously, burning creates a hazard in itself, and requires the skill set to do it. Swiping may be possible, but it depends on terrain. Grazing is probably more versatile, but animals need to be sourced and managed. With burning and swiping, you are trying to keep heather at 7- 10 years old maximum, so that any flames are not above head height. These areas need to be kept free of trees. With grazing, you are deliberately over-grazing the area, turning it to grass, and keeping it short and green to prevent a fire passing. You may need a combination of sheep and cattle to do this. It is possible that wetland areas can help as well, but only if they sustain vegetation that does not burn.

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The heather in the foreground here presents the opportunity for a firebreak. Photo credit Victor Clem

Fire breaks do not need to look unnatural within a landscape, but they do force you to examine your overall ethos of managing land, and compromise a bit to make safe the pinewoods that you do have. With very large areas of land that are not broken up in some way, there is nothing that you can do. With at least some areas of less flammable vegetation within the landscape, you are giving yourself a chance. You do have to be able to access these areas, so maintaining hill roads to allow people to get there quickly is essential.

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Good access is important. This road could be swiped to help it act as focus for back burning if neces

Fire breaks can add diversity to a landscape. They allow for easier access, and better deer control. They can help frame views, and they can help maintain species that require shorter vegetation. If grazing is used, then they allow for production, which helps with longer term sustainability.

It should be said with all this that many people will give you the impression they know what to do when a fire breaks out, and then things look very different when something actually does happen. In my experience, the level of urgency given to planning around this is very low, and often very superficial. The urgency is only there when it happens, but by then it is too late. Only then do you find out if you were really prepared or not.

What to do?

It is inevitable that we will see more fires in the future. Within the Cairngorms, we can educate people and provide a ranger service, but over a 30-40 year period, the risk of a fire happening in a given area is high. So, we cannot just assume that we can prevent all wild fires. What we can do is break an area up so that fires can be contained and do not become genuinely landscape scale. In the cold light of day, we have been very lucky that this one was not a lot larger than it actually was.

Taking the Cairngorms, that thinking needs to be applied to the whole park area, not just the area that burned this time. It needs to be done quickly now, or the conversion process at least started quickly.

Appropriate levers must be used. The most obvious of these would be to deny all properties (public, private and NGO) access to public funds for land management until proper wildfire plans are in place in high risk areas. That is something that government can do now.

I am not sure what the set up in the Cairngorms is now, but when I worked on Deeside, we had the South Grampian Forest Fire Protection Group. An important element to that was that all personnel attending a fire response would do so at an agreed hourly rate for staff of different types, and for different equipment. If this does not already exist, we need an agreed list of rates across the park area. What this does, in my opinion, is that it then treats everyone as professionals with an acknowledged value. It also allows us to see what fighting a fire has truly cost, and it focuses the minds of land managers on that cost. Doing so might then force them to take the necessary steps that would allow some-one in the future to keep a fire constrained within acceptable boundaries.

Finally, there is a role for government in all this. It is a matter of national importance, not just an inconvenience that takes people away from something more critical. The USA, Canada and most EU countries have a capacity for effective wildfire response from our public authorities. We do not. There needs to be a way of maintaining helicopters and other necessary equipment, available for lease or use for other purposes, but where the default function is wildfire suppression as required. We need a capability to tackle multiple fires around the country, not just individual incidents. There will be a cost to doing this, but the investment in woodland creation is massive, and the carbon cost of getting these things wrong is also huge. We do need to protect the resource we have.

If we do not address this, multiple fires over time will simply erode our confidence that we should be growing these forests at all. Insurers will conclude it is too risky. Government will conclude it is too risky. Many owners and perhaps the public will conclude it is too risky. The balance will tip back towards a

more open landscape, and then people will recognize something that they perhaps had never thought of before. It is not just grazing that maintains our open landscapes, but fire is a big part of that too, and perhaps even more so.

Imagine you are a land manager who has spent a significant proportion of your working life in a given area, and invested much of your energy and aspirations in to achieving pinewood and wider habitat recovery. Would losing it all be too much of you to bear? If so, then you need to use your position to do something about it. Assume that the worst could happen to you. It can happen at any time, and you have to be ready for that. You do not have to compromise your pinewood vision, but you do have to adapt a bit so that you do not lose it all.

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