The Newsletter for the Cairngorms Campaign

Enhancing the Conservation of the Cairngorms

THE CAIRNGORMS CAMPAIGNER

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The Cairngorms Campaign postal address:

"Cairngorms Campaign, PO Box 10037, Alford,

CAIRNGORMS NATURE ACTION PLAN 2013-2018

Photo Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group

Aspen in full autumn colour. A species identified in the Plan as needing encouragement.

This is the Park Authority's plan to reverse biodiversity loss and indeed enhance biodiversity in the Park over the next six years although the document also sets out a vision for how the Authority would like the Park to be in 50 years. It certainly states clearly its conservation value.

Quick Quote
Nature Action Plan page 7

"—whilst the National Park covers less than two percent of the UK's landmass, it is home to a remarkable 25% of its threatened animal, insect, fungi and plant species."

Almost half the Park's area is designated under the Natura 2000 network to protect features or species of conservation interest. "*Nowhere else in Britain*" it correctly states, *" can you find such a collection of habitats of very high quality and exceptional size and scale."* In total, 155 actions are specified to take place between 2013 and 2018 to reverse the biodiversity loss and many seem commendable and supportable.

Quick Quote
Nature Action Plan page 19

"The low ground of the Cairngorms National Park is of enormous importance for nature because of the diversity of species there."

Measures like the creation of ponds or reintroducing the pearl mussel to sites on the River Avon are certainly achievable. Other problems will need a harder look. The plan for example emphasizes the biodiversity value of the Park's low ground, but in Badenoch and Strathspey, it is the Authority's own policy of extensive housing developments that is a major threat to that biodiversity.

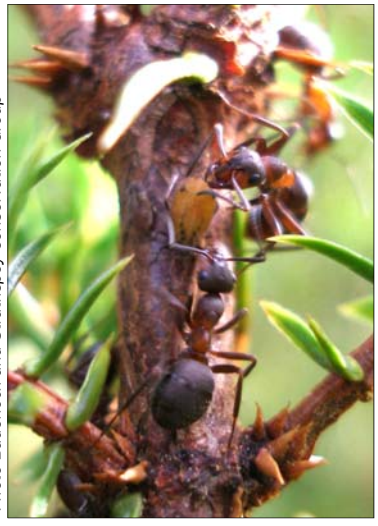


Photo Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group

Wood ants with greenfly on juniper bush in the forest .

How effective will the overall plan be? It declares, *"Whilst the Park is still undoubtedly one of the best areas in the UK*

CAIRNGORMS NATURE ACTION PLAN 2013-2018 continued

for biodiversity, we need action to halt the biodiversity loss that is taking place." Any plan like this needs a firm analytical foundation based on a sound analysis of what these losses are and, above all, what is driving them – socially and/or economically but that's what is lacking. There are very broad descriptions of biodiversity losses under habitat types like woodland, wetlands, montane areas and blanket bog but no analysis as to **WHY** these losses are occurring - that is what is driving the damaging trends – and it is the **WHY** that is the key to designing measures to reverse them. Without that link, actions to reverse them are disconnected from the solutions. This is a key weakness it shares with the Park Plan. The Plan relies for its successful execution on encouraging voluntary effort and levering in external funding such as from the Big Lottery. But such funding applications are closely scrutinised for a sound analysis that makes these connections. A statement from page 20, epitomises this disconnect. *"Across large parts of the National Park"* it says, *"the existence of these havens for biodiversity is thanks to actions by generations of land and water managers, who have helped to shape and conserve them."* Somebody needs a reality check – a renewed acquaintance with a century or more of highland ecological history and land management.

Examples of this lack of connection between cause and solution are clear. Take for example, restoration of blanket bogs. Action 3.1(b) states, *"promote the adoption of, and adherence to, the muirburn code and the importance of avoiding moorland damage."* But the muirburn code is well founded and has been actively promoted by various organisations for decades, yet badly practised muirburn, sometimes on a huge scale, even blatantly illegal, has become increasingly common in the Cairngorms since the 1990s! Lack of promotion is clearly not what is behind this trend so increased promotion is unlikely to solve the problem. Most of the muirburn occurs on grouse moors and there are emerging problems in grouse moor management, of which badly practised muirburn is only one. The Plan needs to tackle this issue more broadly.

A second example is overgrazing by red deer. This is widespread in the Cairngorms, causing loss of woodland and/or prevention of tree regeneration, degradation of moorland and blanketbog erosion. Clearly action is needed. Anyone who knows the reality of the history of red deer management over much of the Cairngorms must smile on reading on page 11, *"The many estates involved in deer management around the National Park work together collaboratively in six deer management groups."* Deer Management Groups have proved notably ineffective and such collaboration as does occur is largely in the interests of sporting estates and not the national interest of protected biodiversity. In reality, it is no exaggeration to say that the management of red deer in the Cairngorms is frequently near anarchic. When considering woodland expansion, on page 42, action 1.1 (c) is, *"To review deer management plans and burning regimes in strategic areas to enable expansion and enhancement."* This does not offer a solution. Witnesses such as Dr John Milne, ex-chairman of the Deer Commission, plus others, are currently appearing before the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee of the Scottish Parliament, pointing out that the system of deer management in Scotland just does not work, has never worked, and it will take legislation and executive powers over control of red deer numbers to make it work.

Section 3.1 identifies the four broad aims of the Plan. The first three, in order as listed, cover improving the quality and connectivity of woodlands and wetlands, implementing priority action for other habitats, and conserving and enhancing key species through focused conservation action.

Quick Quote

Nature Action Plan Section 3.1

Fourth Aim of Strategy

"Encourage, support and provide opportunities for people to realise the benefits from, and help to look after nature."

Rightly, many of the specific actions under these themes itemise monitoring and research into biodiversity including the status of species and habitats. This is basic and essential. However many actions to tackle the problems focus on educational approaches such as providing advice, raising awareness, and promoting best practice. But such measures are only effective if lack of information is a key constraint. In many instances, as above, there is little evidence that it is, and much evidence that it is not. For example, on page 9, the Plan states, *"For generations it has been recognised that it is possible to deliver biodiversity gain at no extra cost or detriment to the business."* Well, no, for generations it has been recognised that maximising the yield of one species, be it wheat, red deer or grouse, usually leads to loss of biodiversity. This is a fundamental feature of intensification, as demonstrated by current practices on grouse moors. It is why mountain hares are being shot out almost to extinction over large areas of the Park to promote grouse populations. It is why an enforced cull of nearly eight thousand red deer was necessary in the Caenlochan area to prevent loss of protected plant species.

In all fairness to the Park Authority, it has actually little or no power over broader landuse issues. Hence most proposed actions aim to bring about change through noncoercive approaches and involvement of people voluntarily.

CAIRNGORMS NATURE ACTION PLAN 2013-2018 continued

Measure 4.1(a) proposes to, "*Develop and implement a stakeholder engagement plan."* In pursuit of this, Section 3, covering Strategy, invites any individual or organisation with a desire to contribute to join an informal *"partnership."* The Plan, Cairngorms Nature, will be steered by a *"strategy group"* of ten representatives of, presumably, key stakeholders. These include government bodies with involvement in land management like the Park Authority, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Forestry Commission plus representatives of landowner interests from nongovernmental organisations– the National Farmers Union and Scottish Land and Estates. Even the Scottish Gamekeepers Association has a representative. The most extensive landuse in the Park is outdoor recreation on foot but there is no representative of recreationists in the Strategy Group. Omitting a key interest from a Strategy Group is a classic error in Stakeholder Management, which is a demanding and skilful activity. If Park Authority staff are to be heavily involved in this activity, they should be offered training in it – which is, after all, available.

The designation of the National Park established the importance of the biodiversity of the Cairngorms beyond dispute. Yet the failure adequately to analyse the causes of the decline of that biodiversity, and the need to rely largely on voluntary efforts to reverse it, make any confidence in the success of the aims of the Nature Action Plan difficult to sustain.

ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN

Civil Court Action Against the Housing Development at An Camus Mor

This issue has absorbed much of the Campaign's effort and hence limited action on other issues. Along with allied NGOs, it still awaits the fixing of a date for the hearing of its appeal. Meanwhile, fundraising to finance the legal fees continues. Members responded generously to the last appeal but more is still needed. Lush, which has an outlet in Inverness and contributes to a range of environmental causes has channeled £7,000 towards the legal costs through the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group.

Bulldozed Tracks and the Launch of the Campaign by Recreational Groups for Planning Control of Their Construction

Creation of bulldozed tracks continues to cause concern and provoke action. A major emerging concern is the construction of huge tracks for the installation of the Beauly-Denny powerline near Spey dam. Observers report seeing a huge mess made by further roads thought to be sporting roads by Rio Tinto, the landowner, and think that no reinstatement will be possible because the top soil and vegetation that would be necessary for this have been destroyed. Wide new roads going up towards Creag Meagaidh, apparently for sporting use, were also observed. The same is now happening at the Drummochter pass.

The Campaign submitted detailed evidence on the impact and poor design of bulldozed tracks to the minister when the question of planning control over such tracks was considered recently. This included a range of pictures that demonstrated the problems clearly and were persuasive in convincing recipients that indeed there was a problem. Government took no action. Another review of the issue was to take place in eighteen months. A group of recreational organisations including the John Muir Trust and the Ramblers Association started a joint campaign including the preparation of a report on bulldozed tracks in the uplands. The Campaign again contributed photographic evidence of outstandingly bad examples of such tracks in the Cairngorms and gave its support to this report. On Thursday 28 November this report was publicly launched, successfully gaining widespread publicity in the media. Perhaps this time sense will prevail and planning controls at last brought in.

Submission of Evidence on Deer Management to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee of the Scottish Government (RACCE)

This parliamentary committee is currently taking evidence on the issue of deer management in Scotland and the Deer Task Force of Scottish Environment Link. Pressure of work has prevented the Campaign from being an active member of this group but it keeps frequent contact with its working members. When this group presented evidence to the committee, the Campaign commented on the draft and then added its name to the list of supporting organisations. There are an estimated 400,000 red deer in Scotland, an increase from about 150,000 in the 1960s. In comparison to other countries, Scotland has very high red deer populations. For example, in Germany, there are c. 150-180,000; in France c. 35-40,000; Sweden less than c.10,000; and Norway c. 130,000 animals.

The evidence pointed out that high densities of red deer populations had widespread impacts on the Scottish uplands with, overall, 321 out of 1203 designated sites

ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN contd.

currently classed as being damaged by deer. Scottish Natural Heritage has recorded many of these sites as damaged by deer for decades. There has been ongoing evidence of deer damage to designated sites, especially woodland sites, for many years, with 28 out of 54 of our most protected woodlands (EU Natura 2000 Special Areas of Conservation) currently classed by SNH as being damaged by deer.

The current system of deer management in Scotland relies to a large extent on a voluntary approach supported by the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 as amended, and a voluntary Code of Practice on Sustainable Deer Management 2012. The focus on deer management in large areas of upland Scotland in particular remains with private landowners who wish to maintain high numbers of male deer for sporting reasons. Of the current 42 Deer Management Groups in Scotland only 16 have current Deer Management Plans in place. How can we have effective deer management in Scotland without effective planning in both the public and private interest? Scottish Environment Link favours a statutory approach to deer management, which is the approach in many other European countries.

Proposal for a Bridge Over the Geldie Burn Near Bynack

A proposal for a bridge to be built over the Geldie near Bynack has emerged among some other voluntary groups in the Cairngorms. Bridge building has a long and sometimes controversial history in the Cairngorms and this proposal will be discussed by the Campaign and other recreational groups like the North East Mountain Trust with which the Campaign keeps a good liaison.

Assessing the conservation value of Grass Field Sites in the Straths

These can be biologically rich for a wide range of species including plants and large fungi. Fungi play a key role in soil fertility. In Badenoch and Strathspey in particular, such sites may be under threat of housing or more intensive agriculture. A standard procedure to assess the biological value of such sites is a survey of, chiefly, their plant life. However, it was uncertain if that gave also an assessment of their value for the diversity of these large fungi on them. The Campaign commissioned a survey of the fungi on a range of such sites in Badenoch and Strathspey to see if the sites with a good diversity of plant species were also the ones with an equal diversity of fungal species. The results show the two things do not necessarily go together and hence, when assessing whether a site should be given some protection from development, both these groups need assessed.

Review of General Permitted Rights in relation to hill tracks in Scotland
Time to Write to your MSP

The Campaign supports the Hill Tracks Group, made up of NGOs like the Ramblers Association, the John Muir Trust and the Mountaineering Council of Scotland. It is campaigning to have the construction of all bulldozed hilltracks brought under planning control. The group published an excellent Hill Tracks Report and is now pressing the minister to act on this issue. The report demonstrated, substantial evidence of unregulated track proliferation in the Cairngorm National Park during the previous year, often crudely constructed and badly drained. They are now urging the minister to bring these developments under planning control. If you have and MSP, now is the time to write to him/her using the points below.

The most fundamental issue is one of democracy: People should have the right to comment on *all* developments that affect them and be able to comment on potential damage to environments that everyone “owns” and benefits from. Bringing these tracks into the planning system would ensure a more equitable balance between public and private interests, and that the planning authority can ensure any new track is constructed in a sensitive way, with enforcement powers if this does not happen. Also, reinstatement of the terrain in the longer term could be ordered.

Tracks have existed in the Scottish hills for centuries including low impact stalkers’ paths, pony tracks and drove roads. There could be need to build new tracks to support genuine changes in land management practices. However, what we are often and increasingly seeing now is the intrusion into fragile landscapes of bulldozed tracks with no care for the vulnerable terrain, visual amenity or the environmental consequences of damage to peat soils vital for carbon sequestration, increased erosion, pollution of water courses and wildlife disturbance. Additionally, once tracks are made it is easy, using modern machinery, to extend them further into wild land areas and other sensitive habitats. Some landowners claim there is already rigorous oversight by SNH, SEPA and the local authority, and that planning permission is already often required for tracks. In fact, in many instances, planning authorities were either not aware the tracks were being built, or of their scale. The only designated sites where planning permission is currently required are in National Scenic Areas. Even in other designated sites, such as Special Areas of Conservation, comments from SNH do not bring any measure of public oversight to the development.

We believe there is a fundamental requirement for such major and potentially damaging developments to be regulated in the interests of the wider public. We therefore think that the only way forward is to bring hill track construction into the planning system and to remove this undemocratic and outdated anomaly of permitted development in this context.

BOOK REVIEWS

Hill birds in north-east Highlands by Adam Watson
Mammals of north-east Highlands by Adam Watson
Birds in north-east Scotland – then and now by Adam Watson and Ian Francis
Points, sets and man by Adam Watson
Place Names in much of north-east Scotland by Adam Watson

Adam Watson has been writing again, resulting in these five new titles. They are a record of his life's work as much as they are the record of the subjects of the books. The first three are of direct interest to Cairngorms enthusiasts. There is a tradition of field naturalists that began in Britain with Gilbert White making his detailed, careful daily observations of wildlife in Selbourne over decades and thus slowly unveiling the hidden histories of their lives. Onto this approach was built on an emerging body of scientific methods and analysis to jointly create highly effective methods of study of wildlife in the field. Adam and his colleagues epitomized that set of skills and much of our knowledge and insight into wildlife of the Cairngorms is founded on their work over many decades. These are not scientific textbooks, rather accounts of observations and investigations by them and hence they are, as much as anything, accounts of his life in the Cairngorms. In Adam's case, acquaintance with a wide range of local people and an embedded respect and affection for them drew in their indigenous knowledge of insights and observations, and of the history of the area. They people the pages with their knowledge, insights, and historical perspective.

The first two of these texts give a historical account of the "stories" of selected species like the mountain hare, red deer and golden plover. They record the impacts of natural forces on wildlife, such as the starvation of mountain hares in hard winters, and the deaths of numbers of red deer in avalanches, but also the pointless, apparently illegal destruction of a species like the mountain hare as part of a more general mismanagement of sporting estates including large scale muirburn.

He is at times scathing in his criticism of the responsible authorities and their failure to act on such issues.

The text on **Birds in north-east Scotland** basically records observations by himself and colleagues, taking a wider look at how species have fared in the northeast in general.

Bird enthusiasts may read through this end to end, but for the more general reader it is more a reference text where the story of species of direct interest can be read up. Still, the maps of change of breeding range of species over longish periods demonstrate how, although the distribution of some like the capercaillie, cornbunting and redshank has contracted, that of most has expanded including raptors like the goshawk and osprey which have extended greatly. .

Points, sets and man will be of particular interest to two groups of people. Dog lovers will love it and field naturalists find an interesting account of the use of dogs as aids in research. There is a set of game dog breeds such as the English setter, that are trained not so much to pursue game but to detect it and "point" with their noses at where it lies. Their keen senses, including their fine sense of scent, can be an invaluable research aid to field ecologists yet this is a first account of their potential, and how to realise it, using examples from Scotland, USA, Canada and France.

Place names in much of north-east Scotland simply lists names and often location of the places. It is a reference text of enormous detail. Yet place names are always intriguing; a kind of archaeology of words, written on the landscape by peoples and leaving clues to their history long after they have themselves faded from the scene. When the roadsign on the left as you travel south down Glenshee, points to *"darg"*, meaning the amount of meadow that could be mowed in one day, it also points to an older way of life before modern agriculture. Similarly, "*cairds neuk"* near Banchory was where tinker groups annually camped after the Banchory show, one of what they called their "greens" and it is an insight into society's mixed perspectives on these nomadic peoples that a "caird" is defined in the Scots dictionary either as a skilled metal worker, as the nomadic tinker groups once were, or as a "vagrant or rough person."

THE Cairngorms CAMPAIGN

Talking Point

REWILDING THE OLD CA
A GROWING C

Centuries of over-exploitation, burning and grazing out of young trees and extinction of species reduced the Old Caledonian forest's character in fact varied between places, sometimes dominated by species like oak, even in the Highlands. However, surveyed these pine dominated remnants. The results, published by Steven and Carlisle in 1959, demonstrated their parlous centuries. Surviving pines were often centuries old. This shocked the then Nature Conservancy and the Institute of Terrestria expanding the remnants. This was the beginning of the restoration of the forest through a long struggle by environmental gro

From "The Future of the Cairngorms" on the Ancient Pine Forest Fragments

"Relics of the ancient pineforest that once spanned Scotland, they retain the boreal atmosphere of the great natural forests of Northern Europe, but yet have their own distinctively Scottish vegetation, tree form, and feeling."

Juniper scrub regenerating in Glen Feshie. Such scrub can aid the spread of the forest by sheltering young trees growing within it from browsing.

How fares the ancient forest now? Certainly, the OCPF fragments are much more strictly protected now under the EU legislation of the Habitats Directive. Even by 1994 an intensive survey by Basil Dunlop, an expert on Scots pine management, identified 2,155 hectares of new natural regeneration in the 40 years since the 1950s, a 36% increase, largely due to a reduction in browsing by deer and sheep. On some estates, like Rothiemurchus and Glentanar, management agreements to ensure regeneration, now current with Scottish Natural Heritage, are extending the forest but on others the key to continuing expansion has been land purchase by new landowners. Glen Feshie sees progress under a management agreement and favourably disposed succesive Danish owners. Abernethy has been purchased by the RSPB and Mar Lodge Estate acquired by the National Trust for Scotland.

The standard approach to regenerating and expanding the forest has been to cull red deer and keep their populations low by continuous culling. In Abernethy and, later, Glen Feshie, this has been very successful and widely supported. On Mar Lodge Estate, with stronger focus in recent years on removing red deer from the area intended for regeneration of the forest, regeneration is now being achieved.

Seedling trees regenerating alongs these have probably established or prevent them being browsed. Deer humans are their predators, hence the track., as seen in this photo

However, these efforts have judiciously planned planting. seed sources and large area rates of forest establishment, was, "*longer than RSPB felt i* deposits they believe they ha with greater densities of broa planting, to introduce more b sources for areas remote fro around them.

But this approach has its imp longer than a human lifespan on the proposals, tackles oth ***'descended from one gene*** *the Caledonian pinewoods s classification."* They continue *composition at some point in derived moraines and soils a* RSPB would degrade, not re ecology.

More broadly, the idea behin condition for defined ecosyst such a condition and it is now determined steady state, ma

Talking Point

LEDONIAN PINE FOREST ONTROVERSY

Pine Forest (OCPF) of Scotland to shrunken isolated fragments, with the largest of these in the Cairngorms. The ancient Highland forests were more often dominated by the Scots pine. In the 1950s, staff and students of Aberdeen University s shrunken state. Grazing animals, often red deer, eating seedling trees prevented regeneration for many years, even al Ecology into forming a Native Pinewoods Discussion Group that developed principles and policies for restoring and oups and agencies.

ide the track up Glen Lui on Mar Lodge Estate. Initially, n bare ground alongside the track, but this would not probably avoid the track to a considerable extent as also permitting some regeneration at a distance from

Pine regenerating on Derry Cairngorm on Mar Lodge Estate

also brought controversy. Enter the RSPB with an ambitious plan to fulfill their vision for their reserve at Abernethy by Studies of regeneration on Abernethy show how the rate of seedling establishment falls off steeply with distance from good s intended as future forest are so distant from seed sources that seedling establishment is sparse. On current and predicted RSPB found it would take a 500 year process of forest expansion by natural regeneration to fulfill its ambition and decided this *t appropriate to wait, to achieve its conservation objectives for the site."* Through techniques such as analysis of ancient pollen ave been able to identify the mix of species in the forest prehistorically, prior to human impact and the landscapes of the time adleaves among the pine. It plans measures to move towards that forest make-up using two kinds of planting. One is enrichment roadleaved trees into regenerating areas of pine that lack them, and the second is pioneer planting of both to provide seed m current seed-baring trees. In both cases only small areas will be planted so as to act as seed sources for the larger areas

portant critics. *"What's your hurry?"* they say. Processes of natural evolution in ecosystems take place over centuries, much n. A critique of the RSPB's approach by three authors, all with major expertise in the conservation of the OCPF, in their report er issues saying, "*The criteria for authentication and classification as a Caledonian pinewood is universally accepted as **ration to another by natural means'** in an unbroken chain in the same locality. This is the fundamental principle which makes o special. Any planting automatically compromises their integrity forever and negates this distinction, which is the highest land* e, *"Even if the time-scale is shorter, planting quotas are totally artificial, and cannot be set according to guesses about forest the distant past, when the climate was more benign. Present day boreal forests in Fennoscandia with similar sites of granite- re often single species pinewoods, or have few broadleaved species.*" Human interventions such as those planned by the store, the genuine Old Caledonian pinewoods, because their main characteristic and value lies in natural history and forest

d the RSPB's vision is of recreating an historical ecosystem, a natural, stable climax ecosystem. But a perceived "pristine" ems would be considered doubtful by many environmental scientists. Few ecosystems are well enough understood to envisage w known that ecosystems, rather than always traversing some consistent pathway to a recognisable, climatically or edaphically y exhibit cyclical, chaotic or switching behaviours, even without human interference. Certainly, degraded ecosystems like the

Talking Point continued

OCPF, when allowed or encouraged to regenerate, seldom return to the some "natural" condition they exhibited prior to degradation, so the aim of recreating some former ecosystem through human intervention may be not possible.

Even after much study, what we know about any "ecosystem" like OCPF is only a fraction of what is going on in them. Their major value lies, not so much in what we know about them, but what we don't know about them and the study of unfolding natural processes like natural regeneration reveals more of that "great unknown."

The RSPB's vision for expanding Abernethy forest up to the natural tree line

"The vision for Abernethy over the next 200 years is bold and ambitious. Abernethy will be widely regarded as the best example of a near natural, boreal forest in Britain, and one of the finest examples in NW Europe of an oceanic boreal forest. The forest will have expanded well towards its natural limit – effectively doubling the forested landscape within our current ownership to around 7,900ha, creating the largest, contiguous area of native woodland in Britain".

But there are counter arguments. 'What is natural?', ask others, in a situation where human induced climate change is already impacting on forests, where the natural predators like the wolf and lynx are gone and where other species that influenced regeneration like the wild boar are also absent? Indeed the forest structure identified by historical studies of Abernethy supported by RSPB would have been shaped, in part at least, by the presence of species like wild boar and wolf that are now absent. What, for example, if it is decided to continue "rewilding" by reintroducing extinct species such as wild boar, already spreading in some parts of the UK. They have a significant impact on regeneration due to the way their rooting creates bare ground suitable for young trees. Further, in the old forest, fire played an important part in creating large areas suitable for rapid regeneration by pioneer species like Scots pine and birch, quickly establishing large stands of trees of uniform age and of single species. But who would use fire now?

Even the constant culling of red deer populations to permit "natural" regeneration is a continuous major human intervention that fundamentally shapes the ecosystem. We now know also that predators like wolves don't just kill prey like deer. They profoundly influence the behaviour of their prey and hence basically alter the ecosystem. For example, they steer them away from areas where they risk predation and hence permit regeneration of forest there. This "landscape of fear" influence, in Scotland, is now largely moulded by the presence of humans, the only major predator of deer left. One consequence of these reservations of course is that the chances of recreating past forest structure by planting trees to act as seed sources, as the RSPB plans, may be slim.

Considering the legal requirements for protected areas, a core value of these forest habitats, when incorporated into the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve, was the natural process of evolution through "natural" regeneration. The Habitats Directive has superseded that UK legislation. As part of the Cairngorms Special Area of Conservation, under that Directive, special features of the site are identified that must be maintained. They include the scale of the protected habitat, its functioning, and distribution and viability of protected species, but lay much less explicit emphasis on natural evolution of the ecosystem. SNH supports the RSPB's plans.

The debate is difficult particularly because it raises issues at an even more fundamental level in environmental management. Underlying the issues is a model of natural resource management, a model of community succession and ecosystem stability where human activity has degraded an otherwise stable natural ecosystem. As one author put it, *"Nature is viewed as relatively constant in the face of change and repaired itself when disrupted, returning to its previous balanced state".* It is a model that has been the subject of much criticism, but is still widely used and underpins much scientific work in the field of conservation biology. Even the very concept of an "ecosystem" as something out there that you can put a physical boundary around, or that is fixed in its characteristics, is often rejected. Ecosystems, under that view, are essentially a way of looking at nature, a concept in our heads rather than something out there and the term ecosystem as often used in much discussion is just a synonym for landscape. Within this view, even the concept of "good ecological status", as defined under the Habitats Directive, may be problematical.

This unresolved debate will continue.

From Steven and Carlisle, "The Native Pinewoods of Scotland"
Commenting on the atmosphere in the Caledonian pine Forest

"To stand in them is to feel the past."

In Brief

Proposal for a Footbridge Over the Dee from Braemar to Invercauld Being Considered

A proposal has been made to span the Dee at Braemar with a footbridge, giving direct access to the central Cairngorms. It was originally costed as a footpath at £350,000. Then it was asserted that it must be a vehicle bridge so that mountain rescue vehicles could cross it. A new design was prepared and the estimated cost soared to £1 million! The rationale behind the need is obscure. There are have been relatively few mountain rescue incidents on this southern side of the central Cairngorms in recent decades and there is already good access for rescue vehicles east and west of Braemar. Clearly such a bridge could benefit tourism in Braemar, opening up a range of walks through interesting terrain. However it would also give access to mountain bykers, removing part of that element of "the long walk in" which has traditionally protected more vulnerable areas of the central Cairngorms. The debate will probably surface if a planning application is lodged.

Intensification of Grouse Moor Management – Some Reservations

A major problem with grouse moors is that grouse populations tend to cycle widely in numbers between seasons, going through characteristic cycles of boom and bust. A chief cause of these cycles is a nematode parasite called strongyle worm – its scientific name being *Trychostrongylus tenuis*. This invades and damages the digestive tract of grouse, considerably weakening them. The parasite's eggs are deposited in the bird's droppings onto the ground where the larvae go through further development before ascending heather stalks to the tip where they can be ingested by feeding grouse. Grouse develop no resistance to this parasite, which is nonetheless vulnerable to a drug called flubendazole.

Since about 2007, these population cycles have been largely eliminated, leading to consistently high numbers of grouse to be shot, and flubendazole seems to be the reason. Flubendazole has been used in grouse moors long before 2007. Gamekeepers on some grouse moors even went out at night, used strong lights to transfix grouse in the dark, catch them, doze them and release them again – to be shot of course. Gamekeepers commonly set out small piles of grit for grouse to ingest to aid the grinding process in their crops. Using "medicated grit" loaded with flubendazole to control strongyle worm is a well established routine. This had limited effect as it was difficult to get enough of the medication into the grouse and flubendazole, it turns out, was acting chiefly by impacting on eggs and larvae on the ground as grouse droppings contained it. In recent years a new formulation with 20 times the previous concentration of flubendazole loaded onto the grit has been introduced and it is this that is controlling the worm within the grouse, preventing large dips in grouse populations and leading to sustained high grouse bags.

However, there are warning lights on the horizon. Intensification of grouse management like this parallels intensification of livestock management on farms and worms of this kind always develop resistance in these situations. This will almost certainly happen on grouse moors if flubendazole is not used with careful restraint, for example for only part of the year and only where the worm is a problem. But will such constraint be exercised? It only needs one or a few grouse moor managers to use the drug intensively for resistance to develop on their moors and thereafter the resistant stains of the worm will spread. Also, new diseases, called bulgy eye and microplasma, are now appearing on grouse and there is at least the suspicion that this is related to the intensive populations of grouse or side effects of flubendazole. Watch this space!

Save the Scottish Wildcat Petition

An online petition to the Scottish Parliament has been launched urging stronger action to save the wildcat in Scotland. At time of writing, nearly 18,000 people had signed up. Anyone wishing to add their signature should go to www.thepetitionsite.com and search under save-the-scottish/wildcat.

Found - Megachile willughbiella!

Or, to put it more simply, a leaf cutter bee. These charming little chaps live in holes in wood or walls and excise elliptical chunks out of plant leaves and use them to make thimble shaped containers that their larvae live in. It was found by, *"an observant holiday maker in Strathspey"* - well actually a bee expert called Steven Falk who clearly spends his hols in unusual ways. The males have fluffy front legs that they use as blindfolds on the female when mating. The things that go on in the Cairngorms! To be clear, this species has been found in several other places in the Highlands but where it was found, the area called the Mossie at Grantown-on-spey, is significant. It is known to be rich in insect and other species such waxcap fungi and gentians and the scabious mining bee *Andrena marginata* which is on 7 European red lists. So what else lives there one wonders? The Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group want it declared a Local Nature Reserve but the Park Authority are permitting housing development on it.

Cairngorm Mountain Ltd and Profits

The Cairngorm Chairlift company's accounts for 2012 – 2013 reveal what it calls an "exceptional year". They show a pretax profit of £238,701. They would however have had to have been double that to cover losses of £440,771 in the previous year. The situation is worse than that. The company is a tenant of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to which it pays rent. As with other tenants, the rent is intended to provide a return on capital (In this case £24m of public assets plus land) plus costs like repairs and maintenance of capital assets like buildings and the funicular railway and management costs of the landlord. Originally, the rent was set at over £500,000 to cover such costs. However, as admitted by HIE in evidence to the Public Audit Committee of the Scottish Parliament, and later confirmed to the Campaign in response to a freedom of information enquiry, it was soon found that the company could not pay an economic rent and

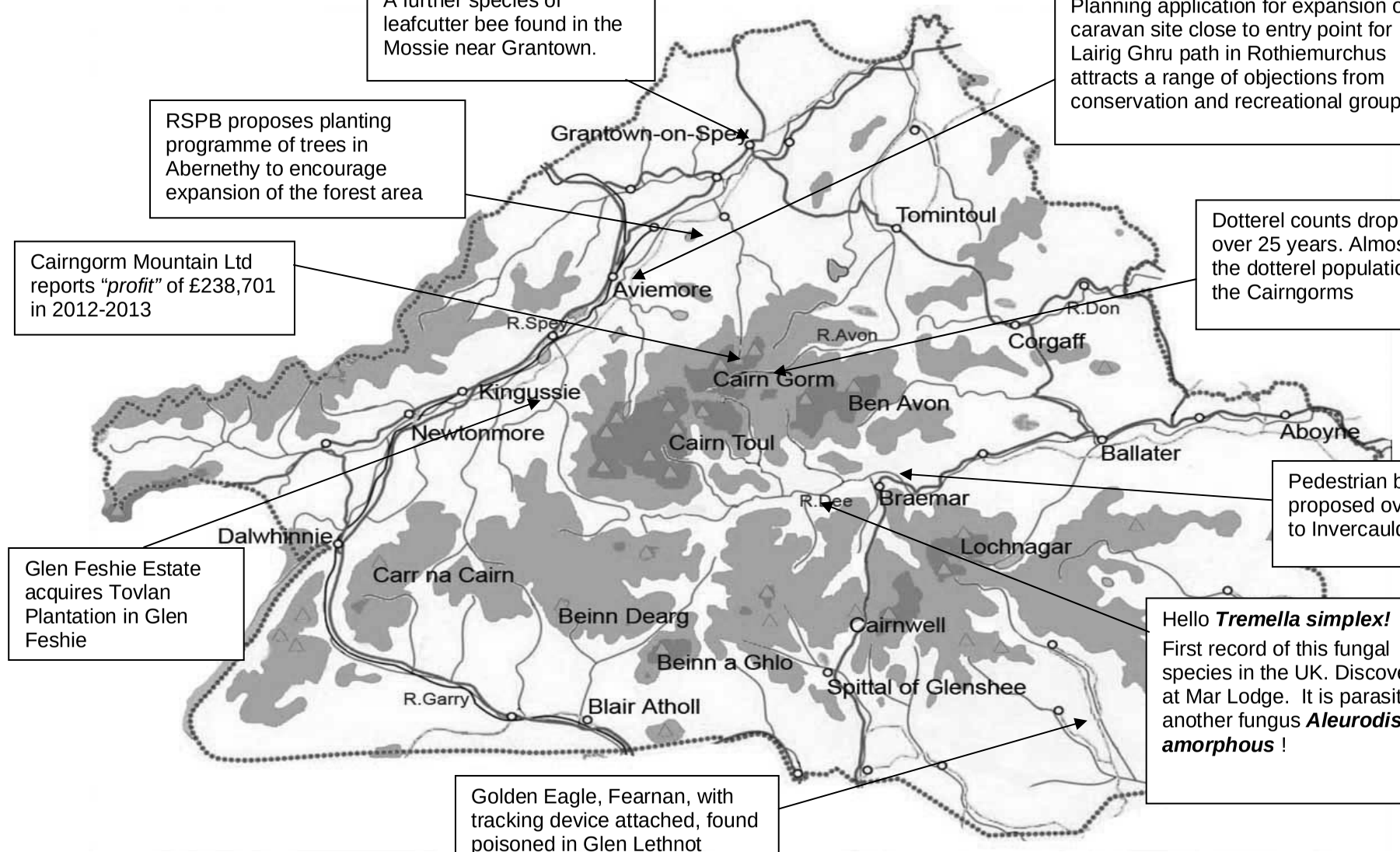
AROUND THE CAIRNGORMS

A further species of leafcutter bee found in the Mossie near Grantown.

RSPB proposes planting programme of trees in Abernethy to encourage expansion of the forest area

Cairngorm Mountain Ltd reports "*profit*" of £238,701 in 2012-2013

Glen Feshie Estate acquires Tovlan Plantation in Glen Feshie



Planning application for expansion of caravan site close to entry point for Lairig Ghru path in Rothiemurchus attracts a range of objections from conservation and recreational groups

Dotterel counts drop by half over 25 years. Almost 2/3 of the dotterel population are in the Cairngorms

Pedestrian bridge proposed over the Dee to Invercauld at Braemar

Hello ***Tremella simplex!***

First record of this fungal species in the UK. Discovered at Mar Lodge. It is parasitic on another fungus ***Aleurodiscus amorphous*** !

Golden Eagle, Fearnan, with tracking device attached, found poisoned in Glen Lethnot

In Brief continued

it was reduced to just £100,000. The landlord's costs however continue and, at best estimates from the first eighteen years, these could be about £330,000 per year even after receiving rent. Who pays the shortfall? We do – the taxpayer. Since HIE is the owner of Cairngorm Mountain Ltd after it intervened to prevent it being declared bankrupt, the Company's operating losses are probably heading our way too. Other ski centres in Scotland, which must compete with the operation on Cairn Gorm, do not get these massive subsidies.

Beavers and the Cairngorms

Beavers have been introduced through an official introduction experiment in Knapdale in Argyle but a further population has established itself in the Catchment of the Tay, whether by deliberate illegal reintroduction or escapes from private collections. It is expanding quite rapidly and is colonising rivers like the Isla. The upper reaches of the Isla are a relatively short distance over the catchment divide to the catchment of the Dee. The Cairngorms Park Authority, in its Nature Action Plan, is considering reintroducing beavers to the Park. The beavers might get there before them.

Illegal Persecution of Birds of Prey 2012

The RSPB's latest report, *"The illegal killing of birds of prey in Scotland in 2012"* states that a golden eagle and two buzzards were confirmed by the Scottish Government as being victims of illegal poisoning. Baits laced with highly toxic and banned pesticides were deliberately laid out in the open in Scotland's countryside. Two golden eagles, a hen harrier and a short-eared owl were shot. A golden eagle, two buzzards and a peregrine suffered horrific injuries after being caught in illegal spring traps. Notwithstanding, the figures show a further decline in incidence this year. Records on incidents since 1989 show annual numbers of detected cases varying erratically and widely from year to year but, since a record high in 2009, there have been three years of steady and steep decline. So, perhaps this is a real and welcome trend. This may be the result of government legislation introducing *"vicarious liability"* legislation by the Scottish Government at the beginning of 2012. Under this, landowners and their agents could be held responsible for illegal persecution of wildlife by their staff if they could not demonstrate clear guidance to them forbidding such acts.

These recorded incidents, often chance discoveries by the public, are only a small fraction of actual cases. Most poisoned birds and mammals will lie undiscovered in the hills and moors. Several lines of evidence show this view is well founded such as the frequency with which eagles and others with tracking devices attached disappear without trace. A further such eagle, Fearnan, has just been found poisoned in the Angus glens, a hotspot for this kind of illegal activity. The sheer scale of suitable territories that lie vacant is grouse moors of the Cairngorms which remain a hotspot of such illegal activities. Illegal persecution is the main factor reducing the hen harrier to remnant populations. Only one pair nested successfully in the whole of England in 2012 and none in 2013. Scottish Natural Heritage's report, *A Conservation Framework for Golden Eagles"* found many vacant territories and concluded that persecution is particularly prevalent on grouse moors in central and eastern Scotland – and a large part of that is in the Cairngorms!

This illegal persecution reflects a culture in a large part of the sporting estate fraternity that they are simply above the law and little will change until that changes. The support of an observant public is important in furthering the protection of birds and mammals and in 2010 the Campaign published a leaflet, *"Help prevent the Poisoning of Wildlife"* which can be downloaded from our website.

Glen Feshie Estate Acquires the Torvan Plantation in Glen Feshie

After some complicated arrangements for landswops, Glen Feshie Estate has acquired the substantial Torvan Plantation in Glen Feshie, situated on the hill west of Achlean Bothie. Apart from permitting the estate to pursue its own policies of forest regeneration in this area, it may also help solve the growing problem of drink and drugs parties at the bothy, reached using motorised access through this plantation. Motorised access can now be prevented.

Cairngorm Stories

MURDER IN THE HILLS

The Cairngorms, like the rest of the Scottish Highlands, with their history of clan feuds, cattle raiding and much else, do not lack their tales of murder and mystery but a few of the Cairngorms incidents stand out for their unusual nature.

There was the affair of the souter for example. A souter, in Scots, is a cobbler and this death took place on the Capel Mounth, the route leading from Glen Muick over to Glen Clova. Today, various cairns have been erected casually by walkers but originally only two marked the way – the spy cairn and the souter's cairn. The spy cairn, near a high point, is where stalkers can pause to use their "glass", their telescope, to spot deer for stalking. Lower down lies the souter's cairn. It dates from after the union of parliaments in 1707. This also introduced excise duties on whisky which highlanders widely distilled. It initiated intensive whisky smuggling, with ponies laden with barrels of untaxed whisky travelling over the hills to the south, constantly evading, and sometimes fighting with, those government tax collectors, the excise men. Once, on a cold winters night, a pony train of smugglers on the pass encountered a local souter travelling in the opposite direction. Here was a problem. What to do about the souter who was a suspected informant for excise men and could get them arrested? Straight murder would raise as many problems as it would solve through the subsequent investigation. So they resorted to low cunning. They greeted him enthusiastically and offered him a large dram of their finest whisky, followed by another and then, of course, another, till he lay drunk in the winter snow. There they abandoned him insensible to die of exposure, with no obvious guilty party. The souter's cairn marks his deathbed.

Loch Muick and the Glas Alt Shiel from the Capel Mounth where the soutar perished in the snow.

But take the murder of Sergeant Arthur Davies, of the General Guise's 6th Regiment of Foot. His murder was not unusual, but what followed was. He was part of the garrison posted to the area after the 1715 rebellion and stationed in Braemar Castle. Sergeant Davies was billeted at Dubrach Farm, then tenanted by a Michael Farquharson and his son Donald who became friendly with the sergeant. On the 28th September 1749, the sergeant was reported missing. Intensive searches found nothing, so rumours of murder, desertion and other explanations arose and spread. In the spring a "herdlass" found his hat in Glen Connie. Local people, terrified of reprisals that redcoats might inflict on the village, hid it, but children found it again. Then, later that summer, came the crisis. A local man, one Alexander Macpherson of Inverey, found human remains on Cristie Hill in Glen Connie, or at least what the eagles, crows and foxes had left of the corpse. The clothing and fragments of hair identified the remains as those of Sergeant Davies! The fear of reprisals terrified him, but left there the remains could be found by others.

Here is where the tale takes its twist. After a week of worrying, Macpherson resorted to cunning. He went to the sergeant's erstwhile friend, young Donald Farquharson at Dubrach Farm, and spun a tale. For two nights he said, the ghost of the sergeant appeared to him in his cottage, told him his body lay on Cristie Hill and appealed to him to give his remains a decent burial. Macpherson must have been a good story teller for young Donald swallowed it. Jointly, they returned to the hill, where MacDonald "found" the remains, and there they secretly gave the sergeant his decent burial. Donald however saw everything of value the sergeant carried including his purse, 22 silver buttons and his silver buckles were gone – this was clearly a murder for robbery. Not until 1753, three years later, did the trail of evidence lead to the arrest of two local men, Duncan Terg and Alexander Bain MacDonald.

The trial at Edinburgh on 11 June 1754 lasted a day and the evidence stacked up and demonstrated their guilt quite convincingly. A hanging seemed due. But then the ghost reappeared – at least in evidence led by the defence with the imaginative Macpherson in the witness box. The crown prosecutors were unhappy at the introduction of ghostly testimony but it provided evidence of the accuseds' innocence and the critical question apparently was what language the ghost had communicated in. In Gaelic said Macpherson, as excellent Gaelic as he used himself. That swung it. The jury returned a unanimous verdict of not guilty though their reasoning may rather escape us now.