

Living With Trees - Case Study

Cairngorm Rewilding

Abernethy (RSPB) <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/rewilding/rewilding-projects/abernethy>

Glenfeshie Estate <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/rewilding/rewilding-projects/glenfeshie>

Mar Lodge Estate <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/rewilding/rewilding-projects/mar-lodge>

The Cairngorms have been relentlessly razed over the millenia by ice, frost, weather, beasts and humans. The mountains of this high plateau have been covered in ice sheets and glaciers hundreds of meters thick, grinding down its peaks and gouging out its glens. As the climate warmed, plants and animals crept back across the tundra and up the valleys, building soil and habitat as far as they could reach, forming scrub of willow and juniper and woods of birch, Scots pine, hazel and aspen. A rich mosaic spread out across the Highlands, with dense stands of forest, clumps of trees and scrub, open grassland, heathland and bog, and probably reached its greatest extent about 3,000BC. This was 'peak wildwood' in Scotland, a sweet spot of abundant natural growth and diversity.

Then a cooler climate caused trees to retreat from their furthest outposts; blanket bog blotted out wetter land, making it unsuitable for trees; early farmers razed small areas and burned some forest, then their introduced stock continued to graze the clearings; post-glacial minerals and nutrients were leached from the soil, making it still harder for trees to grow; the wildwood was broken up into isolated clumps, each now an island struggling to survive in a hostile landscape. More than half of the wildwood was gone before the Romans arrived down south; more was razed by fire and grazing in the following centuries, reaching a low point in the 18th century.



Granny pines with natural regeneration, Abernethy, Cairngorms

Yet there are ghosts of these lost landscapes emerging from their long burial; pale shapes revealed in the black peat. In Lairig Ghru, a central glen of the massif, the bleached stumps of pine trees have been exposed in eroded peat hags. They would have been sizeable trees in their time, possibly some 800 years ago. Once the trees died, the slow creep of peat, deepening by a millimeter a year, would have overtaken the valley. Imagine a wood here in this deep glen, where there is not a tree in sight today... Similar stumps in Glen Geldie have been dated to around 2000 years old.



Ghost forest, Lairig Ghru, Cairngorms

At Mar Lodge Estate in the 1700s the remaining woods were under pressure from crofters seeking firewood and building materials, and from the estate owners expanding logging and cattle grazing. Then sheep farming brought more hungry browsers to the glens, soon to be replaced in the 19th century by the new fashion for deer stalking. The estate pursued these projects with a passion and sought to eradicate any animals considered a threat. In one 10 year period, the five parishes from Mar Lodge to Ballater record killing 634 foxes, 44 wildcats, 57 polecats, 70 eagles, 2520 hawks and kites, 1347 ravens and hooded crows, not to mention those 'destroyed by poison, or died of their wounds'. Now only about 1% of the original wildwood (and its inhabitants) remains in Scotland and this is still being razed by huge numbers of deer.

Let's pause a moment to consider what has been lost . . . We are at a turning point for this landscape.

Now the post-glacial return of vegetation needs to begin its slow advance across the (almost) bare land for a second time. In fact it has already started. The cleared hillsides and scoured glens are seeing a revival of life as restoration projects have emerged over recent decades. Like pine popping their heads up out of the heather, reforestation projects have sprung up to look after the remnant clumps of Caledonian Pine, expanding them and adding more native woodland to the landscape as well.

The Cairngorms are blessed with three such projects: Abernethy in the north (RSPB), Mar Lodge in the south (National Trust for Scotland) and Glenfeshie in the west (private estate). Though the high plateau would not be suitable for trees, the National Park has mapped the

intervening glens as suitable for woods, or at least scattered trees and shrubs. So eventually, they could stretch out along the glens to link up.

That remaining 1% of trees is often a stand of 'granny pines', some 200 years old, stranded in a sea of heather, with no succeeding generations. There are few sights more heartening than to see a scattering of young pines now growing up around one of these gnarled veteran trees. This is made possible by a drastic reduction in deer numbers on all three estates. Mar Lodge is on its way to doubling its area of Caledonian Pinewood.

Woodland Management

The long term vision is: "To have established a self-sustaining intimate mix of structurally and compositionally diverse woodland and non-woodland habitats extending from the valley floor to the natural altitudinal limit for tree growth; that are ecologically and culturally appropriate for the site and climatic conditions, that increase connectivity between habitats (particularly the remnant pine areas) across the landscape and within the site through the development and expansion of woodland networks, that respect and where possible enhance conservation of the estate's cultural heritage assets and that provide a range of ecological and social services without the need for intensive management "



Mar Lodge Estate 2017 Management Plan

Much of this restoration is 'rewilding', in the sense that the trees, plants and animals are colonising new ground themselves. We are still intervening, but instead of contributing to the destruction, we are trying to promote a more authentic ecological balance where natural flora and fauna can thrive. Sometimes the parent populations are no longer present, so planting and re-introduction of species is necessary to fill the gaps. Either way, the over-exploitation of the land has been reined in and nature allowed to re-claim and re-clothe these hard-worn hills.