

WILD LAND NEWS:

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group

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Front cover: Beinn Bhuraich hill track ditch on Corriegarath Estate near Foyers, June 2009.

Photo: Alex Sutherland

Comment

Rob Mc Morran (Co-ordinator)

Welcome to Wild Land News 75! Calum Brown kicks off this edition, with an authoritative look at the issue of hill tracks. Despite repeated calls for action, the commissioning of research and clear recognition of the need for action, little has been done to arrest the development of these intrusions into Scottish wild land. As Calum points out, hill tracks are not

just intrusions on scenic quality, they are in fact much more, with a variety of associated environmental impacts. The continued proliferation of hill tracks, as with the approval of Beaully-Denny, demonstrates a key point: Scotland's wild land continues to be grossly undervalued by decision-makers. To counteract this, the SWLG strongly encourages you to send

us information about tracks you come across and sign The Mountaineering Council of Scotland's petition (www.hilltrackscampaign.org.uk).

Next up, Philip Ashmole revisits the rewilding debate, responding to many of James Fenton's assertions in WLN 73 which relate to the use of active land management to encourage land to 'rewild'. Carrifran is an admirable achievement and a real lesson in 'people power', with the purchase of the site facilitated by donations from over 900 folk! Philip returns to the argument of key-stone species and once again the reintroduction of lynx is advocated as a deer control measure. Philip's vision may be viewed as optimistic by some; however, it is also something else – inspirational. Carrifran is already having an impact beyond its own boundaries and the vision of such initiatives is highlighting the potential for a more widespread rewilding of the uplands.

Chris Andrews draws our attention to the importance of long term monitoring in wild areas. Taking a look back at his own involvement in monitoring the Allt a' M-harcaidh catchment in the Cairngorms, Chris highlights the importance of assessing changes which are often invisible over the short term and only apparent from long term monitoring and data analysis. Chris's article highlights a key point – large scale visible impacts on wild land are not the only type of impact such areas face, with long term climate change and gradual land use changes also representing potentially massive threats over the longer term. Interest-

ingly, the article by Roger Cottis further illustrates the importance of long term monitoring in relation to the impacts of wind farms on bat populations.

The SWLG is also delighted to be able to include two articles from SWLG members in this edition. Geoff Moore takes an impassioned look at some of the myriad inconsistencies around the renewable energy agenda, while Robert Russel takes us on an intimate journey which illustrates the depth of importance of wild land to him at a personal level – as well as highlighting the importance of the continued work of the SWLG! Finally, Heather Morning takes a quick look at what wild land means to her and how being without it, even for a few weeks, simply drives her nuts!

On a more depressing note, on the 6 January 2010, the controversial plans for a line of giant pylons from the Highlands to central Scotland were given the go-ahead by the Scottish Government. In February, the Beaully-Denny Landscape Group (of which SWLG is a member) requested that the Beaully-Denny Inquiry be re-opened. Specifically, Jim Mather MSP has been asked to respond to questions regarding procedural errors in the handling of the decision, the need for a Strategic Environmental Assessment, and an inconsistent approach to under-grounding. The message from the BDLG is very clear: the fight is not over yet.

We hope you enjoy WLN 75 and we welcome further articles and letters.

10 March 2010

Environmental Change Network in the Cairngorms National Park: 10 years and counting

by Chris Andrews

Long-term monitoring of ecosystems is important if we are to understand the impacts of climate change, land management and other developments on Scotland's wild land. Chris Andrews from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Edinburgh explains why work in the Cairngorms is vital for understanding long-term change. All photos are by the author.

Fortunately for me, I find myself in the enviable position where both work and personal interests often take me to the same part of the world. The weekly Wednesday drive north along the A9 between Perth and Kinross never fails to surprise me. Whether it's because of the visual changes of the landscape through the seasons or a more localised interest due to inclement weather (frequent), no two journeys ever seem the same. I think it's that feeling of suspense that keeps me alert and awakened, not as you might think, watching for that moment of lunacy that driving the A9 seems to

bring out in some drivers, but for the moment the section of dual carriageway up the Pass of Drumochter spits you out in the Highlands. The change in the landscape over the relatively short area from the agricultural/pastoral lands of Glen Garry around Blair Atholl to atop the Drumochter pass is, to me, staggering; it's amazing what a few metres of altitude can do to a landscape!

And then there's the weather. Without doubt, on the drive toward Drumochter, I will have been making bold predictions to disbelieving students about the ex-



Looking south to Sgòran Dubh Mòr, Allt a'Mharcaidh

pected weather around Feshiebridge (our destination), almost certainly predicting the exact opposite of the weather we've encountered on the drive so far. Luckily for me I am more often than not proved to be correct, and the students, having been mentally preparing for a day in the rain, happily find they can keep their waterproofs stashed away for another day. It's one of those complexities of mountain weather systems that the Pass of Drumochter often acts as a useful buffer with rain on one side when there are drier skies on the other.

Ultimately our destination is the Allt a'Mharcaidh, a small catchment of 10km², just west of Feshiebridge. The site became part of the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve in 1954, and was partially ring-fenced to protect against deer in 1972. Now, the fences are long gone and recent land management strategies have been to allow the area to re-wild naturally, with the only exceptions being the necessary control of deer numbers and occasional brushing around paths through the forest. The catchment is a good microcosm of the greater national park. There is the seemingly obligatory forestry plantation on nearly all adjacent land, but on entering the catchment proper this subsides to ancient Scots pine stands. On the slopes above the older trees there is that rarity of Scotland; a scattered but regenerating natural tree line. Higher still, the catchment contains large areas of rank heather and damp bogs rich in mosses and cotton-grass, until eventually opening into the wind-scoured heaths characterised by lichens and clipped heather, so

typical of the higher plateau. Dominating all stands the high peak of Sgòran Dubh Mòr at 1111m.

The walk up onto Creag Follais on the east side of the catchment rarely fails to deliver some interest either. An old stalkers' path cleverly takes you gently (though some colleagues may disagree) up the 400m of ascent, taking in all the habitats mentioned previously. All British members of the grouse family are regularly seen whilst we occasionally encounter many of those unique species that tourists visiting the national park hope to see (I'm now only holding out for a sighting of the elusive Scottish Wildcat!). Last November alone we had two very close encounters with Golden Eagles in the forest, brightening up days that would otherwise be remembered for the quantity of water passing straight through supposedly waterproof clothing.

My appreciation of how the Cairngorm Mountains are now is somewhat heightened by the thought of changes that are predicted to take place in the not-too-distant future. A mixture of climate change, pollution and land-use change in the next 50 years is likely to see drastic change in the landscape we currently know. General warming may see the region become drier with less snow-lie in winter (although this December and January brought a welcome change to the norm!), leading to increased wildfires and subsequent loss of vegetation and peat; and whilst some atmospheric pollutants (notably sulphur) have declined

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over recent decades, the deposition of others, such as nitrogen, may see the spread of more competitive grasslands into areas currently occupied by heather. A reduction of grazing land for use by forestry and recreational enterprises is also likely to have dramatic impacts on the landscape we see today.

These regular visits are a fortunate bonus of my work as an ecologist for the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. My research involves the operation of an upland research site for the UK Environmental Change Network; one of 12 terrestrial sites in the network (www.ecn.ac.uk for those whose interest I have managed to spark). Through the collation of a large array of biophysical data we hope to answer questions such as "Is the environment of our wild areas changing?" "If so, how is this affecting the animals and plants that inhabit them?" "How can we better manage the land to lessen the effects of any future change on wildlife?" The data required to answer these questions are collated in a number of ways. We use an automatic weather station and the chemical analysis of collected precipitation, soil water and stream water to create the bulk of the physical environmental data, whilst surveys of fauna (typically beetles, moths, butterflies and spittlebugs) and flora provide much of the biological data.

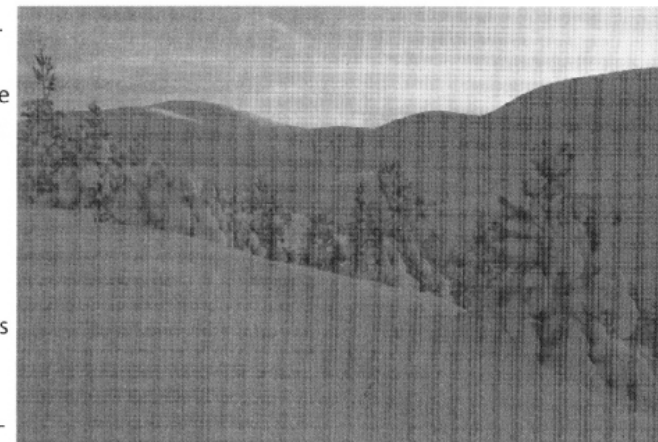
The unique location of the Cairngorm Mountains makes them an especially important site for monitoring in both the UK and Europe. Despite the maritime

climate of the British Isles, the height and mass of the Cairngorms mean they experience a more continental climate than more westerly mountains (the Pass of Drumochter being a fine example of why). It's this location which has led to the sensitive sub-arctic montane habitats found within the Park (there are not many other locations that support reindeer herds on these shores), but which ultimately puts the habitat at an increased risk from a warming climate. Species constituting the sub-arctic habitats already exist close to their southerly distribution limit, so only a modest increase in ambient temperature is likely to push them beyond their thresholds and see them out-competed by more adaptable species. Effectively we could expect to see montane species initially migrate to higher altitudes, but with further warming this may eventually lead to local extinctions. It is because of this heightened sensitivity that we could see biological and physical change here earlier than many other sites both in the UK and abroad. This in turn makes our research not just important to the UK but also to several other European and global networks of which we became a part; these include SCANNET, a network of high latitude sites from around the northern hemisphere, and GLORIA, a network of montane sites from around the world. Our position in these two networks demonstrates the importance of this site's location between alpine and arctic climates.

As we have only been collecting data for a relatively short time (10 years) we are still not confidently able to discern long-

term trends from background fluctuations, although so far we have recorded significant increases in both ambient temperature and windiness. There is also growing evidence of both an increase in extreme climatic events (largely intensity of rainfall, although it's worth keeping this winter in mind as another example) and a decrease in beetle populations.

I like to hope that in 50 years I could still be out enjoying the uplands (not sure my knees would agree!) and that decades of records showed that nothing had substantially changed, that the species and landscapes I love now will still bring pleasure to people. Unfortunately only time will tell. Land management practices may help mitigate some future impacts, but a slow process of change is al-



Deep snow in the upper Allt a'Mharcaidh (Christmas Day, 2009) captured by a remote imaging system

most inevitable. A small hope then, that through continuous long-term monitoring we are better prepared to predict and hopefully protect our ecosystems from whatever change the future brings.

For more information about the Environmental Change Network, log on to www.ecn.ac.uk.

Membership subscriptions for 2010

You may have seen a "Red X" on your envelope that we sent the last issue of WLN in. This was fairly successful in reminding members to renew their memberships for 2010 – thank you very much to those who did - but we still have a few outstanding subscriptions. We would be very grateful if members could please pay their subscriptions for 2010 upon receipt of this magazine, if they haven't already, rather than leave it until later in the year. Early subscription allows us to plan ahead, and with 4 issues of Wild Land News anticipated this year, we really do need your continued support. Funds are required for campaigning on issues like Beaully-Denny, launching new campaigns, developing educational and promotional material, and raising SWLG's public profile. Thank you very much for your ongoing support.