



Scottish
Environment
LINK

Still Delivering the Goods

Case Study 11



ONGOING



PLANNED

Cairngorms Connect

A partnership of neighbouring land managers



Photo: Cairngorms Connect/scotlandspicture.com

Read the full report, with the 15 case studies here:

<https://www.scotlink.org/publication/still-delivering-the-goods/>



Background

The biggest habitat restoration project in the UK, Cairngorms Connect was founded in 2014 and has four partners: Wildland Limited, RSPB Scotland, Forestry & Land Scotland, and NatureScot, all of whom serve on the partnership board. Collectively, the partners manage 600km² within the Cairngorms National Park and the National Park Authority is a supporting partner.

The partners are represented by senior staff at all meetings and have met (almost continuously) monthly since inception. A small team (9FTE) has been appointed to develop the partnership and build the work programme. These posts are funded by the **Endangered Landscapes Programme**.



Project aims

Cairngorms Connect has a range of aims – most notably:

- 1 Habitat restoration:**
 - a. General reduction in impacts of deer grazing through collaborative deer management across 60,000ha.
 - b. Restoring forest habitats:
 - i. Improving quality of existing forests (13,000ha).
 - ii. Expanding forests to their natural limit, including montane woodland at ca. 900m asl (ca 13,000ha potential new woodland).
 - c. Restoring peatland habitats (total 10,000ha).
 - d. Restoring rivers and floodplains (approx. 1,000ha).
- 2 Delivering Ecosystem Service benefits, in particular:**
 - a. Contributing to Net Zero targets by:
 - i. Reducing carbon emissions.
 - ii. Increasing carbon sequestration in woodlands, peatlands and coarse vegetation.
 - b. Adaptation to likely impacts of climate change.
- 3 Communications and involvement.**
 - a. Building understanding and awareness of the importance of the partnership area, amongst communities of 'place' and 'interest', including local communities and visitors.
 - b. Building understanding and value amongst local businesses.
 - c. Providing opportunities for involvement, as volunteers, interested members of the community, direct employment, contract work, and study.
 - d. Enabling active engagement in planning land management decisions, in accordance with guidance from the **Scottish Land Commission**.
- 4 Skills development** – through a restoration apprenticeship programme.



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Project Timescale

The project has a 200-year vision, shared by all the partners, which includes the following description of the “end result”:

“By 2216, Cairngorms Connect’s woodland habitats are the best examples in NW Europe of an oceanic boreal forest. The forest has extended well towards its natural altitudinal limit, including montane scrub which has become well-established across the montane ownership of the partnership. This has been achieved principally by natural regeneration, in the presence of grazing animals. Limited planting has been used to establish seed-sources for under-represented tree and shrub species, which have become well established. These woodlands – including some plantation areas – have a high degree of naturalness, characterised by structural variety and high deadwood content. Wetlands have water tables at near-natural levels, and attributes of more-natural floodplains and hydrological systems, are well-established. Peatland habitats have recovered from the impacts of historic grazing and subsequent erosion. There are no longer extensive areas of ‘hagging’; the blanket bog is actively building. Invasive non-native species are rarely recorded in the project area.”

The current work programme is scheduled and itemised, to the end of December 2023.



SBS Objectives

The aims from the **2020 Challenge for Scotland’s Biodiversity**:

1

To protect and restore biodiversity on land and in our seas, and to support healthier ecosystems.

This project’s central goal is the protection and restoration of a wide variety of biodiversity, as well as improving several ecosystems, with a focus on woodlands, peatlands, and wetlands. This project is particularly significant as the area managed is both large and contiguous, and the shared vision extends to 200 years.

2

To connect people with the natural world, for their health and wellbeing and to involve them more in decisions about their environment.

The project is led by landowners/managers and involves their staff, contractors, and suppliers. It connects a wide range of key audiences, including members, visitors, and local communities, with nature.

3

To maximise the benefits for Scotland of a diverse natural environment and the services it provides, contributing to sustainable economic growth.

Led by landowners/managers, the project will ensure that the habitats protected or enhanced will be recognised for their ecosystem services, be economically sustainable and support employment.

Cairngorms Connect is cited as an exemplar in the **Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Post-2020: A Statement of Intent** (pages 4 and 15).



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Project Summary

Cairngorms Connect is a partnership of neighbouring land managers, committed to a bold and ambitious 200-year vision to enhance habitats, species, and ecological processes across a vast area within the Cairngorms National Park. Its 600km² is a landscape of ancient woodlands, intersected by rivers and lochs, encircling an Arctic-like mountain massif. It is the most extensive landscape of its type in Britain, with vast tracts of blanket bog, tranquil wetlands, and secret woodland bogs. It is home to plants, insects, birds, and mammals that are found in few other parts of the UK.

The project will expand native woodlands to their natural limit; repair damaged blanket bogs and bog woodlands, and restore natural processes to 1,000ha of modified floodplain. It demonstrates how habitat restoration can be achieved in collaboration with local communities, providing nature-based solutions to address climate change and biodiversity loss, whilst benefitting the local economy.



Climate Impacts

Land management to reduce carbon emissions, and increase carbon sequestration, include:

- Repair damaged bog woodlands (900ha by Dec 2023).
- Repair damaged blanket bogs (1,400ha by Dec 2023).
- Collaborative deer management reducing grazing and trampling impacts on 10,000ha of peatlands across the partnership area.
- New Scots pine regeneration (800ha by Dec 2023).
- New native woodland establishment by planting (600ha by Dec 2023).

Land management changes, aiding the adaptation to the likely effects of climate change, include:

- Increased water-holding 'sponge' capability of the bogs retains water high in the catchment; while increases in coarse vegetation and tree cover will increase 'catchment friction' and slow water movement.
- Slower-moving rivers and restored floodplains, slow water and increase flood-storage capacity.
- Wooded habitats are a lower fire risk than open moorlands and grasslands, and restored bog woodlands are a lower fire risk than drained bogs.
- Wooded catchments reduce warming of watercourses.
- The expansion of the forest to its natural limit, increasing altitudinal range and providing opportunities for species to move to occupy a new climate envelope.



People Information

- **Direct employment within the partnership area:** 46FTE across the 4 partners, and 9FTE employed in the Cairngorms Connect Team (Dec 2020).
- **Supported jobs** not yet known, however, in 2019 the total value of contracts awarded across the partnership was £632,400.
- **Wider engagement:** Measuring engagement is complicated but, as an example, in 2019, around 23,000 people learned about the project and 2.1 million people heard about it on BBC *Autumnwatch*.
- **Visitor numbers:** around 1.1m visitors come to the project area each year, with Glenmore the most visited location.

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Photos: Cairngorms Connect/scotlandpicture.com



Successes and achievements

As an example of progress, in 2019, the project achieved:

- 184ha cleared of non-native conifers.
- 114ha of Scots pine plantation restructured.
- 550ha of new native woodland planted.
- 348ha of blanket bog restored.



Issues and challenges

Some restoration elements have been difficult to fund, for example:

- Floodplain and hydrological restoration.
- Deer management in remote locations and at high altitude, where tree regeneration is slow, so Scottish Forestry grants are of limited value.
- Some partners are ineligible for Scottish Forestry grants.
- Small-scale planting in remote locations to establish seed-sources, such as montane willows.
- Large-scale floodplain restoration measures.
- Community engagement and involvement.

It is for these aspects of the project that support from ELP has been particularly important. A shortage of experienced peatland restoration contracts has also made it difficult to make the most of the substantial assistance available from the Peatland Action Fund.



Funding

This is highly variable and depends on the funds available to each partner in any given year. As an example, the total invested in restoration and communications in the project area, in 2019, was more than £2m. It is expected that the total investment from 2019–2023, including ELP funds (see below) will be over £9m.

In 2017, the partnership applied for funding from the **Endangered Landscapes Programme**, and in 2018 was awarded a US\$5m grant to support the project over a five-year period (2019–2023). Cairngorms Connect is one of only **8 landscape-scale restoration projects in Europe** to have received this funding.



Further information

<http://cairngormsconnect.org.uk/>
<https://www.endangeredlandscapes.org/>