

JOHN MUIR TRUST

JOURNAL

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Call of the tide

Exploring the Trust's magnificent coastal properties

A photograph of a forest floor covered in bluebells. Tall, mossy tree trunks stand in the background, and a path of brown leaves leads through the flowers. The scene is bright and green, suggesting a sunny day in a woodland.

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The 2015 AGM and Members' Gathering takes place in Caernarfon, on the edge of Snowdonia National Park, from 15-16 May. Find out more about our guest speaker, landscape photographer Glyn Davies, and book your place before 1 May. All welcome! www.johnmuirtrust.org



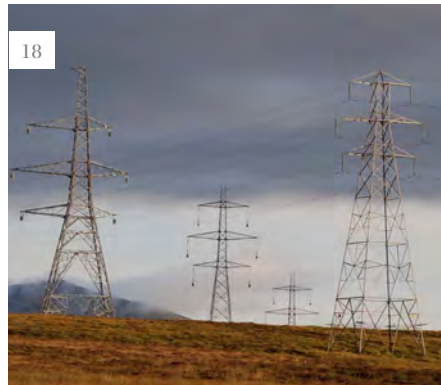
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10



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INSIDE FRONT COVER: WOODLAND AT COED ABER ARTRU, NORTH WALES, DAVE NEWBOULD

JOURNAL 58, SPRING 2015

Editor:
Richard Rowe journal@jmt.org

Managing editor:
Alan McCombes alan.mccombes@jmt.org

Design and production:
CMYK Design www.cmyk-design.co.uk

This journal is printed on Revive 100 uncoated stock, a recycled grade paper containing 100% post-consumer waste and manufactured at a mill accredited with ISO 14001 environmental management standard. The pulp used in this product is bleached using an Elemental Chlorine Free (ECF) process. We use a Scottish printer, Thomson Colour, which has excellent environmental credentials, achieving environmental standard ISO4001 plus FSC and PEFC standards all in 2006.

If you would rather receive publications from the John Muir Trust electronically, please email membership@jmt.org


The John Muir Trust is a Scottish charitable company limited by guarantee. Registered office: Tower House, Station Road, Pitlochry PH16 5AN

Charity No. SC002061.
Company No. SC081620

HEAD OFFICE

John Muir Trust
Tower House
Station Road
Pitlochry
Perthshire PH16 5AN

t. 01796 470 080
w. www.jmt.org

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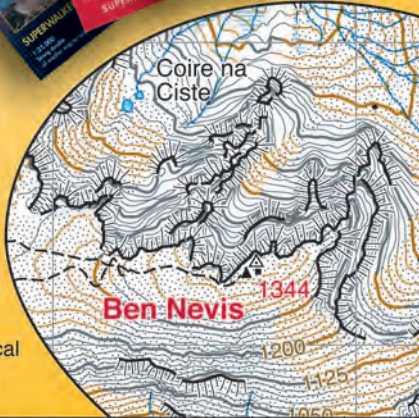
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From the chief executive

WELCOME to the spring edition of the John Muir Trust Journal. Most of our regular readers are already members of the Trust; if you're not, then please do consider joining as it's the best way you can support our work to protect wild places.

As well as providing updates on ongoing projects and campaigns, we always try to bring something new to you in the Journal. In this issue, we journey from



Knoydart to Skye and beyond to Sandwood as we explore the diverse areas of coastline that are in Trust care – often wildly beautiful margins that are home to a range of charismatic wildlife and fascinating communities. They are areas that we perhaps do not talk about enough.

Over the years, the Trust has built a reputation for having a strong and distinctive voice, speaking up for the importance of wild places and highlighting their value on many different levels. Of

particular concern has been the rise of industrial-scale energy developments – particularly onshore wind farms – which pose a very real threat to the quality and extent of wild land in the UK. Elsewhere in these pages, our head of policy, Helen McDade, explains our thinking around current UK energy policy.

As we go to press, we still await the ruling from the Court of Session on our judicial review against the Scottish Government over the process of approving the giant Stronelaig wind farm in the Monadhliath Mountains. Please keep an eye on our website for updates or, better still, sign up for our e-newsletters and receive updates directly via email.

Following our last edition, in which we announced

our first ever John Muir Award Appeal, we focus on the story of the Award's growing presence in Wales over the past decade. Our work through the Award is highly respected, borne out by the hundreds of providers and partners we work with, plus the more than 30,000 people who participate in Award activity around the UK every year. Thankfully, there is now much more recognition of the value of nature for people's overall wellbeing. We can be proud of our role in helping spread that message. Thank you to all who have supported our Award Appeal to date, and I hope the article by Phil Stubbington, our Award manager in Wales, encourages many more to follow suit.

Finally, I recently spoke at an event in London promoting the idea of a Greater London National Park City. It's an interesting idea that's captured the imagination of many. Even politicians are taking it seriously. The more people who have a positive experience of wild places, the greater the chance of helping secure their long-term conservation. Putting a label on these places, such as a national park, sends a message that there is something there of value – and encourages people to visit and experience such places for themselves.

It's a virtuous circle, but one that requires a first step. My hope is that we see more national parks of all shapes and sizes, and that their paths and trails enable many more people to take their first steps towards an appreciation of our precious wild places.

Enjoy this latest issue of the Journal.

Stuart Brooks
Chief executive, John Muir Trust

Here's looking at you:
our coastal properties
are home to a rich
diversity of life



Double celebration at the Wild Space

Perth and Kinross Council has thrown a civic reception to mark two recent milestone achievements by the John Muir Trust: the delivery of 100,000 John Muir Awards in Scotland; and topping a UK-wide online poll to win the TGO Outdoor Campaigner of the Year 2014 Award. Addressing the reception in the Trust's Wild Space Visitor Centre, Provost Liz Grant and local MSP John Swinney praised the role of the Trust. Mr Swinney, who is also Deputy First Minister of Scotland, said he was proud that the charity which looks after some of Scotland's greatest landscapes is based in his own constituency, and added: "100,000 John Muir Awards is a fantastic achievement that shows the relevance and significance of the John Muir Trust."



Scotland's Deputy First Minister in the Wild Space with local John Muir Award pupils

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Trust urges protection of Wild Land Areas

The John Muir Trust has written to Energy Minister Fergus Ewing asking him to refuse consent to three huge wind farms in official Scottish Government Wild Land Areas.

Glencassley and Sallachy wind farms would both be sited on the west side of Loch Shin, within Wild Land Area 34. The two developments would involve 45 turbines, each three times the height of the Skye Bridge, along with over 30km of new access tracks, and other infrastructure.

A third development, Allt Duine, would consist of a further 31 turbines, all located within Wild Land Area 20, which covers the Monadhliath Mountains.

The letter, from Trust Chair Peter Pearson, points out that the Scottish

Government has already rejected Glenmorie wind farm in Easter Ross on the grounds that it would have a detrimental impact on wild land, and states: "This refusal sent a strong message to developers that it is inappropriate to bring forward large-scale wind developments in areas now recognised in Scottish Planning Policy as nationally important for their wild land qualities."

The letter goes on to ask the Energy Minister "to make the same decision and refuse consent for the Allt Duine, Glencassley and Sallachy wind farms, all of which impact significantly on Scotland's flagship Wild Land Areas."

The full text of the letter can be found at <http://bit.ly/1xUoLG8>



Fantastic support for inaugural Award appeal

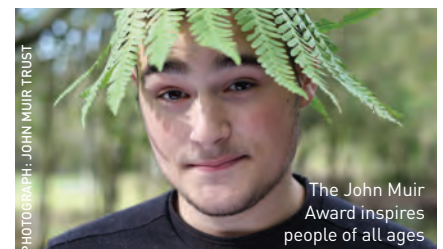
The Trust's call for support to connect more people with nature has resonated strongly across the UK, with many donations received since the John Muir Award appeal began in November last year. Thank you to all who have given so generously.

Comments received via social media have ranged from 'If only all the kids knew there are adventures beyond the PlayStation ...', to 'People should watch and listen to nature more often. It's a great healer!'

As acclaimed wildlife photographer, Peter Cairns, commented: "I'm often told that it's the younger generation that needs to be reconnected with nature, but I think they already are; they just don't always realise it. The John Muir Award is an inspirational initiative; it unlocks the door; it lights the blue touch paper, reigniting something that is deep within all of us."

We rely on donations to run the Award. Please donate to our appeal and help us inspire people of all ages to protect wild places for future generations to enjoy.

www.jmt.org/connect.asp



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

The John Muir Award inspires people of all ages



PHOTOGRAPH: MARK HAMBLYN/2020 DIVISION

Have you seen a hen harrier?

The RSPB recently launched the Hen Harrier Life project which aims to secure a future for one of the UK's most threatened birds of prey. As part of a major information-gathering exercise, members of the public are encouraged to report sightings of hen harriers between the months of April and June.

In Scotland the Heads up for Harriers initiative would

like to hear from you at HenHarrier@snh.gov.uk, while more information is available at <http://bit.ly/1EjhSxy>

Meanwhile, in England, details of sightings can be sent to henharriers@rspb.org.uk, or call **0845 4600121** (calls charged at local rates). More information is also available at www.rspb.org.uk/henharrierlife

Push for equal rights in planning system

The John Muir Trust has joined a range of environmental and community organisations to support a campaign for fair decision making in the Scottish planning system. The campaign group Planning Democracy is calling for Holyrood to introduce an 'Equal Right of Appeal' to create a level playing field between developers on the one side, and local communities and environmental groups on the other.

Under the current system, a developer has the right to appeal against a decision by a planning authority – a privilege that is denied to any community group or environmental charity which challenges an application. Had such a system existed, the Trust would have been able to lodge an appeal against the Stronelairg wind farm decision instead of taking out an expensive judicial review.

A petition from Planning Democracy calling for an Equal Right of Appeal will be discussed at the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Regeneration Committee in the near future. At that stage we will be looking for your help – so look out for updates in our monthly newsletter, or else contact campaigns@jmt.org, or phone Mel Nicoll on **01796 484938**.



The centre's students in concert

PHOTOGRAPH: NATIONAL CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Music from the land

The National Centre for Excellence in Traditional Music, based in Plockton, Wester Ross, has teamed up with the Trust to produce an eight-track, 40-minute CD dedicated to the diverse properties owned and managed by the Trust.

The CD will be launched by the young musicians at two public performances in Highland Perthshire – a concert at the Birnam Institute on 17 June, and a less formal daytime event at the Trust's Wild Space in Pitlochry the following day.

The project began with a period of research to find music associated with the Trust's properties. Pupils then formed groups to arrange the music and, finally, under the supervision of tutors, they made the recording.

"So much of Scotland's music and song is associated with the land and landscape,

especially in the Gaelic tradition, and the John Muir Trust's work in preserving that landscape is vital," commented centre director, Dougie Pincock. "Despite being very much young people of the 21st Century, our students are fully aware of this link and its importance. In an exercise earlier this year discussing what Scottish traditional music meant to our students, the word 'place' was right at the centre of their mind map."

In purely educational terms, it's been a valuable cross-curricular project, but students have got a lot out of it on a personal basis as well, noted Dougie. "It's also worth adding that everyone we've dealt with at the John Muir Trust has been great to work with – professional, courteous, and entirely committed to making the project work. It's been a pleasure!"

2015 AGM and Members' Gathering

This year's AGM and Members' Gathering will take place in Caernarfon, North Wales on 15-16 May. The event will include work by acclaimed photo artist Glyn Davies, who will show inspiring images from wild Wales and beyond. All welcome! For further information, or to book, visit <http://bit.ly/1x8gN7S>

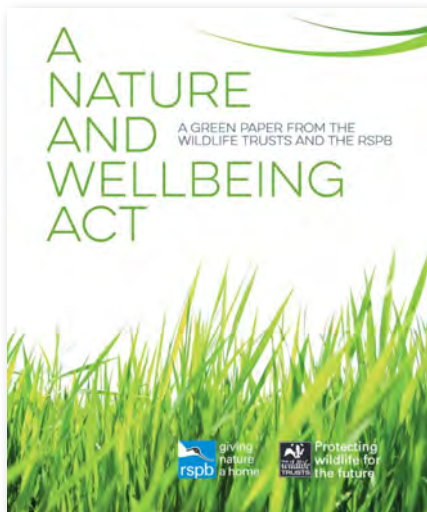


Gearing up for the general election

In the run up to the 2015 General Election, the Trust's advocacy officer, Sheila Wren, will attend a range of events across the political spectrum, and contact the main architects of the party manifestos.

Meanwhile as part of its wider lobbying work, the Trust is also calling for a national spatial plan to identify wild and irreplaceable landscapes where development should be avoided. And because the greatest impact on the UK's wild land is from energy infrastructure, there is a particular call for an independent National Energy Commission (see p18 for an interview with our head of policy, Helen McDade).

In addition, in England and Wales, the Trust is part of a consortium of 20 major environmental NGOs calling for a Nature and Wellbeing Act, which aims to restore nature within a generation for the sake of people, wildlife and the environment.



Stronelaig legal challenge update

The Trust's legal challenge against the Scottish Government (and also developer SSE which joined in as an interested party) took place over three days between 11 and 13 February at the Court of Session in Edinburgh.

The case revolved around several points, including the fact that the decision flew in the face of advice from the government's own advisory body, Scottish Natural Heritage; that Stronelaig was removed from the final draft of the Wild Land Areas map as a result of the ruling; and that ministers failed to provide adequate reasons for ignoring that advice. A decision is expected within two to three months.



Tom Weir's widow Rhona with the sculpture of her late husband at Balmaha. Below right: sculptor Sean Hedges-Quinn at work on the bronze statue

PHOTOGRAPHS: LOCH LOMOND & THE TROSSACHS NATIONAL PARK

Tom Weir immortalised in bronze at Balmaha

A bronze statue to celebrate legendary writer, broadcaster and keen supporter of the Trust, Tom Weir, was unveiled on the shores of Loch Lomond in December. Hundreds of people, including Tom's widow, Rhona, attended the ceremony (complete with her late-husband's signature bobble hat). The project was driven by the Tom Weir Memorial Group and the Friends of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs.

And the work isn't over yet: they still need a hand to raise funds and keep the site tidy. For more on how to help, visit <http://bit.ly/18xmW20>





Helping hand for major environmental art project

The Trust is involved in a new initiative to encourage young people from 4–19 to explore their environment through art. The largest art project of its kind in the UK, It's Our World is a mass celebration of the environment that promotes sustainability.

Advising the project on education and sustainability, the Trust is working closely with partner organisations, such as 2020VISION, Jupiter Artland and The Wild Network, and using its wide network of contacts to encourage people to include wild places in their artwork. Trust properties (and those of partners) will feature in some of the work.

Nikki Cannon, a teacher at Portree High School on the Isle of Skye, recently ran a project which explored the environmental, physical and human geography of Skye. "My experience of using the John Muir Award in school greatly influenced and inspired the direction of our project," she said. "Our art was inspired by Skye's habitat, wildlife and vegetation and made from recycled materials, linking to the ethos of 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle'."

The Portree pupils' artworks now feature on the It's Our World online gallery. The deadline for submitting artwork (which can be uploaded on the It's Our World website) is the end of May, just before the UN World Environment Day on 5 June. The entire collection will then be handed over to the British Library later this year. www.itisourworld.org.uk

News in brief

- A hearty thank you is due to four Trust supporters due to run in the 2015 Virgin Money London Marathon. Tabitha Dickson, Patrick Gray, Bridget Pollock and Rory Webster will all pound the streets of London on 26 April to raise vital funds for the Trust's work. Good luck to all! And if you are interested in running for the Trust next year, or have a fundraising idea of your own, please contact Adam Pinder on **0131 554 0114**, or adam.pinder@jmt.org
- The Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network, a ground-breaking nature-based citizen science initiative which began in England in 2007, has been expanded to include Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Funded by the BIG Lottery, OPAL allows people of all ages, backgrounds and ability levels to get hands-on with nature while collecting important scientific environmental data. Trust staff and volunteers recently received training on conducting OPAL surveys, while OPAL is also suitable for John Muir Award groups. www.opalexplornature.org
- Trust chief executive Stuart Brooks and members of the John Muir Award team participated in a recent event on London's South Bank exploring the intriguing concept of 'National Park Cities'. An idea being pioneered in London and Glasgow, the aim is to replicate the purposes of National Parks in an urban setting. It's an initiative that opens up an opportunity for the Trust to highlight the importance of wildness even in built-up areas, and demonstrate how John Muir Award activity can inspire people to connect with nature.
- Trust members David Lintern and David Hine have cooked up a wonderful challenge that will see them walk and paddle across Scotland from Ardnamurchan to Spey Bay to raise funds for the John Muir Award. The C2C4k challenge will see the pair travel from coast to coast, scaling each of Scotland's nine summits over 4,000ft along the way. It's an inventive and – most likely! – arduous challenge. For details on how to support them, visit <https://www.givey.com/c2c4k>



Pupils from Ullapool High School explore the Summer Isles

Funding for community nature projects

Eleven community-based projects across the Highlands and Islands have benefitted from funding support totalling £20,000 from the John Muir Trust's Conservation Land Fund.

They include Pearls in the Classroom – a project involving the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust and five primary schools in Assynt to raise awareness of the plight of pearl mussels; the North Harris Mountain Festival – a week-long programme of walks, events, presentations, guided trips and more; and a visit to Tanera Mor in the Summer Isles

by a group of pupils from Ullapool High School.

Mike Daniels, the Trust's head of land and science, commented: "Our Conservation Land Fund was established to help community projects on land that is either managed by the Trust or by community landowners that we work in partnership with. We're delighted to be able to support such a diverse and imaginative range of projects."

A full list of funded projects can be found on the Trust website.

Down by the sea

From Skye to Knoydart and north to Sandwood, the Trust manages more than 50 miles of coastline on its properties – often wildly beautiful margins with many stories to tell, writes **Richard Rowe**

THERE CAN BE few landscapes like it anywhere in Scotland, and perhaps none that speak of such raw, elemental power. From the jetty at Elgol on the Isle of Skye, a place where the mountains thrust from the sea with almost indecent haste, the eye is drawn north to where Loch Scavaig funnels beneath the saw-toothed ridge of the Cuillin Hills. Even from a distance, it's an intimidating skyline.

And there is telling detail in the foreground too: cliffs that have been peeled by wind and sea spray to reveal layers of rock that can be counted like rings on a tree; a beach strewn with boulders smoothed by the relentless pounding of the sea; and storm-tossed strands of kelp that have been ripped from their moorings beneath the water line. Driven by the rhythm of the tides, it's a wildness very different to that found on mountain and moor.

Elgol sits towards the southwestern tip of the Strathaird peninsula – together with Sconser and Torrin, part of the Trust's trio of adjoining estates in southern Skye – with one eye looking straight into the heart of the Cuillin, and the other out to the distant lump of Rum and the Small Isles. Given the location, it's perhaps no surprise that the Trust fields regular filming requests from production companies in search of epic backdrops; scenes from the new Hollywood production of *Macbeth* were filmed recently in and around Sligachan, while Bear Grylls managed to scare Ben Stiller witless while exploring the Cuillin and Spar Cave last year as part of his *Wild Weekend With TV* series.

But as well as fish out of water, these wild margins also provide habitat for a range of creatures that are very much at home. Otters forage in the shallows for crabs and other prey, while at nearby Camasunary, deer wander down to the shoreline to graze on nutrient-rich seaweed. Offshore, the gannets that plunge-dive to feast on hidden shoals of fish are often joined on the water by

gatherings of Manx shearwaters from the mountain-top colony on nearby Rum.

In the warmer months, resident populations of harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin share the sea with migratory whales and dolphins, as well as basking sharks – at up to 11m in length, the second largest fish in the world after the whale shark. It was on the nearby island of Soay that Gavin Maxwell launched his short-lived basking shark fishing factory – the sharks were hunted for the oil found in their livers – before becoming rather better known as a naturalist and author of *Bright Water*.

How times change. Hunted in Scottish waters as recently as the 1990s, basking sharks are now the subject of major conservation efforts, with proposals for four extra Marine Protected Areas – on top of the 30 already confirmed – to safeguard not just basking sharks, but also minke whale and Risso's dolphin (see sidebar).

Specialist plankton-feeders, basking sharks are found in temperate waters the world over and start to appear around the western coasts of Britain from May. Little is known about where this slow-moving giant spends the rest of the year. What is clear is that their numbers off the west coast of Scotland have risen sharply in recent decades, although surveys undertaken by the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) from its research boat, the *Silurian*, have revealed a decline in the number of sightings over the past two years. "We do not know the reasons for the lower relative abundance in recent years, but perhaps it is due to natural cycles in oceanographic factors that might affect the sharks prey [calanus zooplankton]," comments Dr Conor Ryan, HWDT's sightings and strandings officer.

Skye is also the heartland of Scotland's growing population of sea eagles, with the number of breeding pairs expected to reach 100 across the country this year – a fitting milestone given that



2015 marks the 40th anniversary of the bird's successful reintroduction on nearby Rum. According to Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), the past year saw another significant step up in the number of occupied territories across Scotland, the vast majority of which remain along the west coast, despite recent releases in the east.

"Among the 16 new territories found, there were several that extended the range of the west coast population, with the breeding range now stretching from Sutherland to mainland Argyll," explains SNH raptor expert, Andrew Stevenson.

Most pairs are still found on Mull, Skye and the Outer Hebrides, with the distinct possibility of encountering wandering immature birds on any one of the Trust's properties on the west coast. One Strathaird resident had a juvenile sea eagle hover above his house for much of the winter – often with a mob of crows in tow.

Now, with a self-sustaining and increasing population, the challenge is more about working with other interests to integrate the birds into the landscape. Concerns remain within the farming community about lamb predation, while many of the forestry birds are in areas where forest felling and restructuring take place.

COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Skye's Strathaird peninsula is home to scattered settlements where crofting and fishing remain important sources of income. However, as in so many of the more remote parts of the Highlands and islands, it's tourism that now helps pay the bills. Many visitors converge on tiny Elgol to enjoy the tours offered by a mini flotilla of boats that take visitors deep into the heart of the Cuillin, or at speed by Rigid Inflatable Boat to the Small Isles.

The trip across Loch Scavaig to the foot of the Cuillin is particularly popular, with the added attraction of passing a large

colony of common seals on the way. From the jetty, it's a short walk to hidden Loch Coruisk, a striking glacial loch surrounded on all sides by some of the highest peaks of the Cuillin. From here, there are numerous possibilities for striking further into the hills, although many return to Elgol on foot. It's a tough walk though that includes negotiating the Bad Step – an imposing rock slab high above the sea that demands respect.

The return to Elgol passes the sandy bay at Camasunary, one of several locations where Trust volunteer work parties carry out regular beach cleans. "Rubbish tends to collect at Camasunary and further south at Glen Scaladale as both are at the head of the loch," explains Sandy Maxwell, the Trust's volunteer co-ordinator. "Our beach cleans are popular as volunteers really see the results, particularly when we hit a beach hard for two or three years as we have done at Glen Scaladale."

Rather than the usual cotton buds and wet wipes found on beaches closer to major population centres, volunteers tend to gather almost exclusively fishing and fish farm-related gear; this means mendings from nets, piping from fish farm cages, and smaller items such as the 'stoppers' that are threaded into mussel ropes to prevent the molluscs from moving around.

But while gathering the rubbish is one thing, actually removing it from remote stretches of coastline is entirely another. It's here that the Trust's boat, the Silver Fox, has come into its own, once returning half a dozen boat loads of rubbish to Elgol from a single beach clean. It's a vessel more associated with the Trust's property at Li and Coire Dhorrcail on the nearby Knoydart peninsula, where it's often used to transport volunteers across Loch Hourn rather more quickly than if walking in.

Li and Coire Dhorrcail is a place where much has been achieved since becoming the Trust's first property 27 years ago. It's a



PHOTOGRAPH: HWDOT



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST



PHOTOGRAPH: KERRY FROUD/HWDOT

landscape transformed, with the once deer-bitten land now finding its feet. Some of the earliest trees planted have matured and produced seeds of their own, while deer fences have come down, allowing natural regeneration to merge with the harder-edged woodland to create a more continuous feel.

And it's a landscape that Lester Standen, the Trust's deer officer and Knoydart property manager, knows intimately having first come here as a volunteer in the 1980s. "It's funny, but I don't think of Knoydart as being on the coast," he says. "It's not inland, but it's not an island either – I see it as a kind of boundary between land and sea."

Lester's feelings about somewhere that has become a place of hard, physical work have changed from when it felt so new and exciting, but what has remained constant is how mountainous and inhospitable the Knoydart peninsula can be. "That appeals to me to an extent," he says. "I do feel drawn to such places."

Largely emptied during the dark days of the clearances, there are still very few people here, particularly in winter. Instead, the hub of Knoydart life is the village of Inverie, its white-washed buildings lining the shore of Loch Nevis on the south side of the peninsula. With no road links, most arrive here by boat from Mallaig, although hardy walkers also make the long trek in from the road end at Kinloch Hourn to the northeast.

The heartbeat of the community-owned Knoydart Estate, Inverie is a vibrant place, with 50 or so full-time residents. Numbers are boosted each year by an influx of temporary workers, as well as tourists, walkers and mountaineers. "They bring freshness and contribute a great deal," says Lester. "Inverie really survives on that annual influx of people."

But Knoydart remains a challenging environment – with Li and

Coire Dhorrcail on the north-eastern slopes of Ladhar Bheinn a cold, dark place for many months of the year. And yet there is colour here, even in deepest winter. In bright weather, with snow on the hills, there is great contrast in the landscape, from the blue of the sea to the orange bark and dark green foliage of Scots pine, the purple of birch, and earthy colours of the bracken.

Things change of course in spring – a period that can be slow to arrive and quick to pass. "It's the time of year when I look forward to the warmth and light as the sun finally starts to come over the ridge to the south," says Lester.

And, crucially, the midges have yet to appear – one reason why seasoned Trust volunteers tend to avoid work parties here in the summer. Part of the problem is that the relatively sheltered Li and Coire Dhorrcail can be a warm, wet and humid place, with only a few gusts of wind to drive the midges away. "I sometimes feel that I am always wet, either from the rain or through sweat, because in summer I'm invariably covered from head to toe to keep the midges out," says Lester.

But despite the challenges, there is magic to be had here, too; it's a place of chance encounters and brief moments. Lester recalls coming off the hill one winter to find himself in the midst of a battle between two snarling badgers; another time, a sea eagle crested a ridge right where he was standing. "It was like an ostrich flying overhead – I think we were as surprised as each other," he says.

And there are tricks of the light too, whether on the hill, seeing the layers fall away to the horizon, or out on the water. "I was in the bow of a canoe once paddling near the head of Loch Hourn," recalls Lester. "The water was so clear and calm that I could see the cliff on the shoreline going down into the depths as if there was no water



Water of life (clockwise from opposite left): a basking shark seen from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust's research boat; common dolphin - a summer visitor; members of the Hebridean population of killer whale; volunteers aboard the Silver Fox, Knoydart

there. It felt like I was floating in the air – there was a real sense of vertigo and that I would drop a long way if I fell out of the boat. It's the kind of experience that is imprinted on your mind."

DUE NORTH

The Trust's other coastal property is a different animal again. The Sandwood Estate in northwest Sutherland, just a few miles south of Cape Wrath, is a land of machair and moorland, dunes and sea cliffs. At its centre is Sandwood Bay, a stretch of sand and dune that rarely fails to entrance, and which was recently named as one of the world's top 50 beaches in the influential *Travel* magazine. But there is much more to Sandwood than just its very fine beach; it's gloriously picturesque, yes, but the sense of history and hardship, light and life are equally affecting.

When Don O'Driscoll, the Trust's conservation officer for Sandwood and nearby Quinag, first set eyes on Sandwood some 25 years ago, it was love at first sight. His introduction was from the sea one summer, following a murky two-week fishing trip out to Rockall. "As we crossed the Minch to Kinlochbervie in brilliant sunshine, I could see those high mountains, the snow patches still on Foinaven, the sandy strips of Sandwood, Oldshoremore and Pòilin, and the white of the houses along the coast," he recalls. "I was just struck by the beauty of it and the brightness – the greens and blues."

And his feelings have changed little since. "It's the light, space, lochs, hills and of course the sea bordering it all. The sea makes it more bearable here after dull wet and windy winters like the one just gone. It's always different, always moving, and enhances those changes of light and colour."

Winters are long this far north, the weather often violent, and → continued

'The waters off the west coast of Scotland are extraordinarily rich in marine life year-round'



PHOTOGRAPH: MENKE VAN GEEEL

Conserving our seas

The waters off the west coast of Scotland are extraordinarily rich in marine life. Some species, such as harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin and killer whale, are resident year-round, while in the warmer months their numbers are supplemented and they are also joined by minke whale, common dolphin and the pale and ghostly Rissos dolphin.

The Hebrides are also home to one of two distinct populations of orcas in Scottish waters. Almost their own sub-species, the orcas here sport downward-sloping eye markings and are actually two metres longer than their Shetland cousins. Sadly, the population, which now numbers just nine animals, looks doomed as the animals are now too old to reproduce.

And there are giants here, too. Although usually further offshore, sperm, fin and humpback whales are spotted from time to time. All provide further argument for the development of a network of Nature Conservation Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) around the Scottish coast – legislation that would extend existing protection of resident species to include the migratory basking shark, minke whale, Rissos dolphin and others.

There are currently four additional MPA proposals being considered for consultation by Scottish Government ministers this summer – including one that covers inshore waters from Skye to the south coast of Mull – together with a further 14 draft marine Special Protection Areas that relate specifically to seabirds and their wider habitat.

Further info

For those with an interest in marine life, the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust offers the chance for paying volunteers to join multi-day research trips aboard its survey ship, the *Silurian*.

www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk/research-Silurian.asp

the landscape an uninspiring brown and grey. But, as Don points out, there is still life to be found: the bright blue of milkwort blossom in mid-December; the greens and yellows of lichen; the red caps of Devil's matchsticks; and patches of spaghnum "glowing red like spilt blood".

It's little wonder though that people crave the signs of spring. It comes in flashes at first, the heads of bog cotton peeking through the coarse grasses, then the first birdsong, and, in the machair, the first flower – usually coltsfoot. It's then that the bogs, silent during the winter save for the sound of wind and surf, come alive.

"In March, the wagtails return, then the wheatears and the geese, and by April it really starts to cascade as more birds return and the greening begins," says Don. "There's such a great feeling of life – a quickening. It sounds and smells different, like the land is stretching after sleep."

PEOPLE OF THE LAND

But in amongst the natural rhythms of the season, there are poignant reminders of the human life that was once here – places where people, evicted from their homes, had to scratch out an existence tending lazy beds, the outlines of which are still visible on poor, hard ground close to the sea.

Today, all of the estate remains under crofting tenure, with crofters using the open moorland common grazings for sheep and cattle. However, crofting alone rarely supports a family. Typically, people here take more than one job. Many work offshore.

Once the heart and soul of the area, the fishing industry has fallen away, but people still look to the sea. "Salmon farming keeps a lot of people in jobs here, as does tourism and the public sector, but the school roll is falling," says Don. "Maybe it's fragile, but there is resilience too, with some thriving local enterprises. People are prepared to invest here and there are many positives – it's a great place to bring up children."

It's perhaps no surprise that the area has seen its fair share of characters down the years – both residents and visitors. Many will have heard tales of James McRory-Smith who for more than 30 years lived as a virtual recluse at Strathchailleach, now a bothy maintained by the Mountain Bothy Association.

He was a bit of an outlaw, and would go on 'sprees' during trips to Kinlochbervie that often led to trouble, remembers Don. "But I saw another side of him when I stayed in the bothy with him. He was rather shy when sober; he read and painted and liked to talk of the birds and deer seen around where he lived."

One time he came to Don with a poll tax demand notice, and asked what he should do. "I wrote back saying he lived six miles from the nearest road, had no water, electricity or street lighting and that he pulled his own teeth. There's no way this man will pay your tax. There were no further demands."

Other encounters have proved just as memorable: Hol Crane, the octogenarian father of TV presenter Nicholas, who one winter spent two days walking to Cape Wrath but wouldn't accept a lift because he wanted to be true to the young people he took on such trips; the walkers, climbers and escapees from urban life; and the inspiring people who attend conservation work parties. Many have become friends.

"All the time, there is a consistent theme – people come and talk about going away feeling refreshed and renewed," comments Don. "The word 'magic' is used a lot." □

About the author

Richard Rowe is editor of the John Muir Trust Journal. He can be contacted at journal@jmt.org

'Our beach cleans are popular as volunteers really see the results, particularly when we hit a beach hard for two or three years'



PHOTOGRAPH: JACK TAN



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

PHOTOGRAPH: PETER CAIRNS/20VISION



PHOTOGRAPH: IAN BROWNLIE ROY

Full tilt (clockwise from main): sea eagle in flight; deer fencing, Knoydart; Sandwood Bay; beach cleaning at Camasunary and Sandwood (top)



Getting involved

This year, the Trust is offering plenty of opportunities to get to know its coastal properties. A comprehensive programme of work parties sees visits to Li and Coire Dhorrcail (in April, June, July, and October) and Sandwood (May and August). To keep up-to-date with volunteer work parties, join the Trust's email listing at workparties@jmt.org

And in July, Don O'Driscoll will lead a special member-only Wild Day at Sandwood – a wonderful opportunity to explore this special place. For more details, contact Linda Coupar, at linda.coupar@jmt.org



PHOTOGRAPH: PETER PEARSON

Change at the top: Peter Pearson on expedition in Greenland (main); John Hutchison (right) hands over the reins as Chair to Peter (opposite)

Passing the baton

With his six-year tenure as Trust Chair having expired, John Hutchison has made way for Peter Pearson – a man whose passion for wild places is matched by his experience of running a range of charities and not-for-profit organisations. It's a natural handover, writes **Alan McCombes**

FROM THE BALCONY of his hillside house on the outskirts of Fort William, John Hutchison gazes across the Great Glen to the brooding expanse of Aonach Mòr and Ben Nevis. "I've always felt a strong, almost spiritual connection to the mountains and the wild places of Scotland," he says.

As John explains, his journey began as a youngster growing up in Edinburgh, near Easter Road, the home of Hibernian Football Club. "I discovered the beauty of solitude in what was then called King's Park – now Holyrood Park – and later went

on to explore the Pentlands and the Border hills."

The call of the wild would eventually draw John northwards. "As a young civil engineer living in Bedford in the south of England, I was asked if I was interested in going to work in either Rio or Hong Kong. But just then, a job came up in Skye as the island's resident engineer. So I abandoned thoughts of jetting off to one of those exotic locations and instead headed for the Highlands. That was in 1971 and I've lived here ever since."

The Highlands got into John's blood. He

learned Gaelic and was even runner-up in the gold medal in the National Mod, the famous annual festival of Celtic music, song and poetry. He also threw himself into community and environmental activism, over the years helping to establish the Knoydart Foundation, the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, the Nevis Partnership and, more recently, the Scottish Rural Parliament. Late last year, he was awarded an MBE for his tireless work on behalf of communities and in support of environmental protection across the Highlands and Islands.

While company secretary of the community-owned Knoydart Foundation, he came to admire the John Muir Trust – a neighbouring land manager on the peninsula. In 2003, he became a member of the Trust, which in turn recognised that his dynamism, experience and community connections could be a valuable asset. Within a few years, he was elected onto the board, and in 2009 became Chair of the Trust.

“My time in office has certainly been memorable,” he reflects. “We’ve had highs and lows. The approval of the Beaulieu-Denny line in 2010 was a bitter disappointment. But we’ve had great times too. In the spring of 2013, we celebrated the 175th anniversary of John Muir’s birth, we opened the new Wild Space visitor centre in Pitlochry, and welcomed Allison Chin, president of the Sierra Club in the US, to our AGM.

“Then, around the same time, we had the launch of a Scottish Government consultation about a new wild land map, which has since been officially recognised in national planning policy. It doesn’t yet provide 100 per cent guaranteed protection, so we still have a lot to do. But the existence of the Wild Land Areas map, covering just under 20 per cent of Scotland’s landmass, puts us in a stronger position than ever before.”

HANDING OVER

Trust members recognise that John Hutchison has been an inspirational chairman, and new man Peter Pearson acknowledges that he will be a hard act to follow. As John’s term in office expired, Peter thought long and hard about whether to stand. “It seemed an enormous responsibility, but after six years as a trustee, I feel I’ve had a good grounding,” he comments.

Peter also has plenty of relevant experience outside of the Trust, having spent 30 years in senior positions – including at chief executive/director level – in the public and social housing sector, delivering affordable housing across Scotland. During that time, he became a major figure in the establishment of a pioneering housing cooperative in the heart of one of Glasgow’s poorest communities. More recently, he played a key role in the Rural Housing Service (now Rural Housing Scotland), working with some of Scotland’s more remote communities, including Gigha and other west coast islands.

And like his predecessor, Peter combines a compassion for people and strong community values with a love of wild nature. He traces his passion for the outdoors back to his childhood on the southern edge of Birmingham.

“We had fields at the bottom of the garden which I used to explore with my



dog most days during the holidays. Then when I was at secondary school, the Parents Association bought an old school in the Berwyn mountains in Central Wales, where we would go on trips. It was derelict, had no water, and was remote, but it really got me into the hills.”

When Peter and his wife Nicki had an opportunity to move to Scotland for work, they jumped at the chance. For many decades they explored the hidden corners of their new home, and also regularly ventured further afield to some of the world’s wildest places, from the Himalayas and Karakorum to Greenland and Spitsbergen.

But it was in bustling Edinburgh city centre that Peter discovered the John Muir Trust. “We’d normally be out in the hills on weekends, climbing Munros or ski-touring. But one dreich Saturday afternoon in the 1990s, I spent the day browsing bookstores and record shops, before ending up in Tiso’s store on Rose Street. There I picked up a leaflet for the Trust and immediately thought it was the kind of organisation I’d like to get involved with.”

Although Peter joined a few work parties, he had little interest in attending meetings – that was until he was galvanised into campaigning activity by the proposed Beaulieu-Denny line. By that time, he and Nicki were living on a hill farm on the edge of the Ochils.

Peter soon rose to prominence as the main spokesperson for the campaign group, Stirling Before Pylons. “We argued for the undergrounding of key stretches of the line to protect not just scenic landscapes, but also some of our most important historic and cultural landmarks such as Stirling Castle, the Wallace Monument and the Sheriffmuir battlefield.”

His campaigning skills led him in 2006

to be listed in the Scotland on Sunday newspaper’s league table of the top 100 most influential people in the country. And although the campaign to stop the Beaulieu-Denny line was ultimately defeated, it helped transform public attitudes towards landscape and nature protection.

“Although not the largest of charities, the John Muir Trust punches well above its weight,” says Peter. “Our stewardship of some of Scotland’s most famous wild areas has allowed us to set an example and demonstrate some of the best land management practices in Scotland. It also gives us the credibility to argue for more general wild land protection and restoration of natural processes.”

“At the same time, by connecting people with nature through the John Muir Award, we’re helping spread, especially among young people, a respect for wild places – the best way of ensuring their long-term survival. I’m optimistic that the Trust is in good shape and is more influential than ever before.”

And John Hutchison is certainly confident that he has left the board in strong hands. “Peter has decades of relevant experience in running not-for-profit organisations. He’s very capable and will make a great Chair of the John Muir Trust.” □

Further info

For much more about the Trust’s new Chair, visit www.jmt.org/trustee-pearson.asp

About the author

Alan McCombes is the Trust’s media manager. He can be contacted at alan.mccombes@jmt.org



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR/TRUST

The fight for fresh thinking

In a wide-ranging interview, the Trust's head of policy, **Helen McDade**, explains why the Trust is now more engaged than ever in the national energy debate – and what is at stake for us all

Map out why the Trust continues to throw itself into the national energy debate with such vigour

The Trust is dedicated to protecting wild places – and in recent years the biggest threat to the quantity and quality of wild land has been energy infrastructure, particularly onshore wind and pylons. Two issues in particular have driven us to seek changes in national energy policy. One is what I would call the 'size' factor and the other is the 'money' factor.

Let's look at size first. Scottish Natural Heritage mapping has shown that the visual impact of wind turbines already operating increased from less than 20 per cent of Scotland in 2008 to just under 46 per cent in 2013. The visual impact of other major built development, from roads to overhead lines and buildings, has increased by no more than a few percent during the same period. That means Scotland's natural landscapes (the best proxy we have for wild land), have been changed visually by onshore wind development to a degree unimaginable a decade ago.

And now the money factor. These huge schemes are not proposed because of unique Scottish planning policies and Scottish renewables targets; they are driven by the UK's excessive subsidy scheme for onshore wind. For developers and landowners, gaining approval for a scheme is like winning the lottery. So the Trust and our allies have to argue for change at UK level. To help us make that case, the Trust has worked alongside engineering groups to call for a National Energy Commission and the introduction of a system called Total Systems Cost analysis for planning our energy infrastructure holistically. We never forget



Breathing space: Helen and friend on Ben Nevis; wind farms are a threat to wild places, but so too are giant pylons, such as those along the Beaulay-Denny line

that we are here to protect wild land, but to do so we need to talk about the energy production, economic and greenhouse gas emissions case.

Wind farms can range greatly in size and visual impact. How many developments have the Trust opposed and what are the criteria for taking those decisions?

In recent years, the Trust has objected to around 40 wind developments out of several hundred that have been lodged. Except for extensions, which can cause concerns about cumulative impacts, nearly all of these are for more than ten turbines, each about 125 metres high (the height of the London Eye or the Forth Road Bridge).

It's widely recognised that we need to step away from the use of fossil fuels if we are to reduce our carbon emissions – and the Trust supports the Scottish Government and UK Government greenhouse gas targets. How is it possible to achieve these targets without large-scale wind development?

By far the most effective – and cheapest – way of shifting to a lower carbon economy would be through greater energy conservation and efficiency. It's a simple fact that the best way to cut emissions is to reduce energy generation and consumption. Energy efficiency and demand management should be top priorities for decision-makers but for too long they have been the poor relations. It's time for energy efficiency to be put in its rightful place at the top of the energy hierarchy. This isn't wishful thinking – again the Trust works alongside organisations that analyse and promote the benefits of energy conservation. More efficient use of energy and better insulated homes would reduce costs, improve people's quality of life and generate jobs. It would also challenge fuel poverty by ending the system which subsidises energy company profits from household fuel bills.

One of the many ironies of our current system is that a growing



PHOTOGRAPH: JAMIE GRANT

number of onshore developments are being proposed for peatlands – our equivalent of the rainforest in terms of storing carbon. We should learn from the mistakes of the late twentieth century, when lavish subsidies drove a huge expansion of conifer forestry plantations in the Flow Country, damaging peatlands. Now we have a rush to build commercial wind farms on those self-same peatlands – incidentally also proposed as a World Heritage site. We need holistic decision-making about land use.

Last year, the Scottish Government adopted the Wild Land Areas map, giving a swathe of our wildest land a degree of protection from large-scale onshore wind developments. A year on, what is the state of play with the map?

The Trust was heartened to see the Wild Land Areas map recognised in national planning policy documents, although we would like to have seen more robust protection – and were appalled by the government’s consent of Stronelaig two weeks before the new map was released. We now await three decisions on large-scale wind farms within two of the Wild Land Areas, which will be a litmus test of whether the government intends to stand firm behind the good intentions of the map and policies.

In the decades following the Second World War, a controversial programme of hydro power was developed to bring electricity to the Highlands, which ultimately proved popular. How would you respond to those that draw comparisons with the current drive for onshore wind?

This is an interesting comparison because hydro power was developed as part of a national plan by a publicly-owned electricity industry working with the government. Under the current privatised system, companies naturally put forward the energy and transmission schemes that will be most profitable for them, even though they may not be the best choice for the nation. That’s why we need a National Energy Commission.

‘It’s time for energy efficiency to be put in its rightful place at the top of the energy hierarchy’

Conservation bodies are increasingly speaking with one voice about the need to protect wild landscapes. Do you sense that public opinion is starting to swing against large-scale onshore wind development?

As more developments intrude into some of the more sensitive heritage areas, it’s become increasingly apparent that serious damage is being done. So folk are speaking out and it’s reassuring that public opinion is increasingly behind our approach. I think though that the Trust can be proud of having led the way by asking some difficult questions. Partly this was due to the excellent technical and economic advice we received at the Beaully-Denny transmission line Public Local Inquiry from volunteer experts. They continue to give us the data and confidence to question politicians and developers alike, including on the less comfortable territory of economics and social impacts.

To date, much of the Trust’s focus has been on fighting wind developments in Scotland, but presumably there are also threats to wild places elsewhere in the UK?

Without a doubt. In England, housing and commercial built development can encroach on wild places. The Trust doesn’t have the resources to respond to individual applications, so outside Scotland we concentrate on planning issues that have strategic implications, such as the proposed transmission lines around Cumbria, which have potential implications for the Lake District National Park. Our experience at the Beaully-Denny Inquiry means we have something to bring to these discussions, and we’re working on that alongside the Friends of the Lake District.

Finally, what are your hopes (and fears) for UK energy policy as we near a general election?

My hope is that the increase in critical analysis of energy policy in the media will lead to governments across the UK adopting a more holistic approach when making decisions, instead of focusing excessively on one particular target. However, my absolute fear is that although more people recognise that some of what is being done in the energy sector is not right for our environment, not what was intended when the subsidy mechanism was devised, and not delivering the best results for either energy targets or greenhouse gas emissions, we still may not see the leadership needed to prevent some of the worst excesses. Our members can help the Trust enormously wherever they live by highlighting some of these facts and problems to their political representatives (see our campaign material at www.jmt.org/wild-land-campaign.asp). □

About the author

Helen McDade is the Trust’s head of policy. She can be contacted at helen.mcdade@jmt.org

A change for the better

The Scottish Government's recent announcement of plans to consult on far-reaching land reform proposals has already generated much debate, as **Mick Blunt** explains

LAND OWNERSHIP and management is a subject that never fails to generate often heated debate. So when the Scottish Government announced in December that it planned to consult on "radical" proposals for land reform, it was no surprise that strong words ensued – from ominous warnings of "unintended consequences" to more strident claims of "a Big Brother-style land grab" and "class war".

The consultation follows the work of the government-appointed Land Reform Review Group, chaired by Dr Alison Elliot, an ex-Moderator of the Church of Scotland and no incendiary firebrand. The Group's final report – *The Land of Scotland and the Common Good* – was a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the current system of land ownership in Scotland, and how it can be reformed to promote greater public benefits and social justice in the 21st century.

Yet, introducing the consultation, Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, stated: "Scotland's land must be an asset that benefits the many, not the few". In a country where it is estimated a mere 432 landowners own half of all private land, turning such an aspiration into reality will inevitably require change.

So what are the proposals, and how might they affect the work of the Trust? Many are quite technical, but a few do have particular relevance to wild land. A striking feature of the consultation document is the government's apparent willingness to challenge the traditional dominance of the sporting estate in upland areas. Proposals include the removal of business rates exemptions from sporting estates, requirements for greater transparency in ownership and land management, and greater regulatory control over deer management.



PHOTOGRAPH: NORTH HARRIS TRUST

The Trust has long argued that more should be done to control red deer numbers in the Scottish Highlands, where sporting interests and the lack of natural predators often combine to maintain excessive numbers of deer – with a devastating impact on our upland ecology.

Years of reliance on the voluntary principle of sustainable deer management have seen little progress. That has led to government proposals to strengthen the regulations surrounding deer management by giving Scottish Natural Heritage stronger powers to compel landowners to draw up and implement "sustainable deer management plans that protect the public interest". The Trust strongly supports this overdue measure, and will press for it to be included in future legislation.

Another interesting proposal is that "where the scale of land ownership or the conduct of a landlord is acting as a barrier to sustainable development" the government may be given the right to intervene and take action. Such intervention could involve landowners having a duty to work constructively with local communities to promote sustainable development, or even being forced to release or sell land.

This could be great news for communities with obstructive landowners who block even modest development proposals, but could it cause



PHOTOGRAPH: MICK BLUNT

problems for organisations like the Trust? We have always tried to support and work closely with communities on our estates. Over the last couple of years, for example, our Conservation Fund has provided grants totalling tens of thousands of pounds to a huge range of community projects taking place on our own and partner properties.

TRUST CONCERN

But the vague wording of the consultation does give us concern. After all, who defines sustainable development? We know from experience that governments tend to put more emphasis on development, and less on the sustainable. And we also know that there are influential figures in the Highlands and



Land for all: the Trust has strong relationships with many rural communities, including community-owned estates such as the North Harris Trust

Islands who regard all development as sustainable as long it contributes to economic growth. Is there a danger that, by owning and safeguarding wild land, organisations such as the Trust are viewed as blocking sustainable development?

We are making strong representations to ensure this isn't the case. The Trust and other conservation organisations manage land in the public interest by protecting some of our finest habitats and landscapes, restoring the ecological health of our landholdings, repairing footpaths and supporting public access.

NGO landowners in Scotland also deliver strong economic benefits to their local communities – research by the University of the Highlands and Islands has highlighted that total direct expenditure by NGOs on site management in Scotland equates to more than £37 million per year. Far from preventing economic activity, our management of wild land demonstrates exemplary sustainable development, delivering economic benefits to local communities and wider public benefits to the people of Scotland.

Overall, the Trust welcomes this consultation. Many of the issues are inevitably quite complex, but we believe that a well thought out land reform programme has the potential to revitalise rural communities while also tackling centuries of historic degradation of our finest upland landscapes. □

Further info
The Trust's response to the Land Reform Consultation can be viewed in full at <http://bit.ly/1ClI5oV>

About the author
Mick Blunt is the Trust's Western Isles area manager. He can be contacted at [mick.blunt@jmt.org](mailto:blunt@jmt.org)

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Gwyllt am Gymru

(Wild about Wales)

From the rugged peaks of Snowdonia to its often spectacular coastline, Wales is a land of natural and cultural riches – not to mention endless scope for adventure. And the Trust has helped people get under the skin of the country for rather longer than you might imagine, as **Phil Stubbington** explains

WHEN PEOPLE THINK of Wales, it may conjure images of sheep-strewn valleys, the dark relics of a past industrial heritage, or even the tourist train chugging up to the summit of Wales' highest peak. However, working for the John Muir Trust in Wales, I have a very different picture. I see forests, hedgerows and school grounds discovered and surveyed by all manner of folk; bird and bat boxes, bug hotels and tree planting; wildlife habitats created and nurtured. And on a daily basis, I encounter people with a thirst for learning and adventure in wild places – all by virtue of participating in the John Muir Award.

Since the Award was launched 18 years ago, the John Muir Trust has forged extensive relationships with more than 140 organisations in Wales, each of which support our vision that wild land be protected and enhanced, and that wild places are valued by all sectors of society.

This network of engagement spans the length and breadth of Wales, including partnerships with organisations such as The Outward Bound Trust and the National Trust, plus the involvement of a host of schools, outdoor centres, adult groups, families and individuals. From a whole school year group of 200 pupils, to a 100-year-old participant completing

Award activity in the centenary of Muir's death, the diversity of Award participation is as rich as the Welsh landscape itself.

And the experiences can be as mild or wild as participants like. "The John Muir Award provided a fantastic opportunity to get out of the classroom and explore wild places right on our doorstep – they might not have been at the top of a mountain, but they were certainly wild to us!" comments Kate Olsen, a teacher at Tynwydd Primary School, Newport. "The Award also helped forge a relationship with our local RSPB reserve that will have our children returning year after year."

Piercing the sky (clockwise from main): Tryfan and the Ogwen Valley, Snowdonia; meadow survey, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park; Snowdon and attendant peaks seen from the south



PHOTOGRAPH: JOE CORNISH



PHOTOGRAPH: PEMBROKESHIRE COAST NATIONAL PARK

Did you know?

The John Muir Trust’s presence in Wales dates back to member No.6, Rob Collister, in 1984. A one-time trustee, Rob remains an extremely active member 30 years on. Meanwhile, the Trust’s first member of staff to be appointed south of the Scottish border came in 2001 when Hugo Iffla became John Muir Award Manager for Wales. To date, thanks to a wide network of Award providers, the John Muir Trust has helped more than 43,000 people connect with, enjoy and care for wild places in Wales.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOE CORNISH

“The John Muir Award provided a fantastic opportunity to get out of the classroom and explore wild places right on our doorstep’

POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS

The depth of these relationships is evident in recent 10-year partnership milestones with Arthog Outdoor Education Centre near Dolgellau, Snowdonia, and the National Trust at Stackpole on the Pembrokeshire coast, both of which work almost exclusively with school groups. Between them, the two organisations have supported more than 17,000 individuals to achieve John Muir Awards since 2004.

“It’s a clear fit for what we offer our visitors,” comments Ack Moore, head of centre at National Trust Stackpole. “The Award offers such a robust, yet flexible scheme that adds so much value to the

experience we already offer our participants. It helps us deliver environmental and educational messages in a context that young people, and those working with them, can relate to.”

Both Stackpole and Arthog have built on their Award activity to not only enhance the opportunities and experiences they provide, but also provide a consistent thread for the many schools that they work with (the bulk of which return year after year).

From organisations delivering hundreds of Awards each year to small groups and individual participation, the John Muir Award continues to go from strength to

Above and below (clockwise from main): Cwm Idwal and the Devil's Kitchen – home of the Snowdon lily; the iconic Adam and Eve stones on the summit of Tryfan, Snowdonia; exploring wild places at National Trust Stackpole, Pembrokeshire



PHOTOGRAPH: GRAHAM LENTON

strength in Wales. And nowhere is that more apparent than in its three national parks – Snowdonia, Brecon Beacons and Pembrokeshire Coast – with 85% of participants completing at least some of their Award activity within national park boundaries.

It's a natural coming together, with the John Muir Trust offering a complementary role in supporting national parks to meet key statutory aims in terms of enabling people to understand, enjoy and care for their special qualities. And with over 12 million visitors each year, the Award provides a fantastic opportunity to work closely with all three Welsh national parks, supporting them to use and promote the Award as a sustainable framework for environmental and educational engagement.

However, the Award is just as relevant to residents of national parks as visitors. The John Muir Trust works closely with Pembrokeshire Coast's Your Park project



'Celebrating 10 years of Welsh language Award activity in 2014 is a milestone that has been greatly appreciated'



and the Brecon Beacons' School Ambassadors programme – initiatives that engage with local residents, organisations and schools, encouraging them to connect more closely with each area and feel an ownership and greater sense of place.

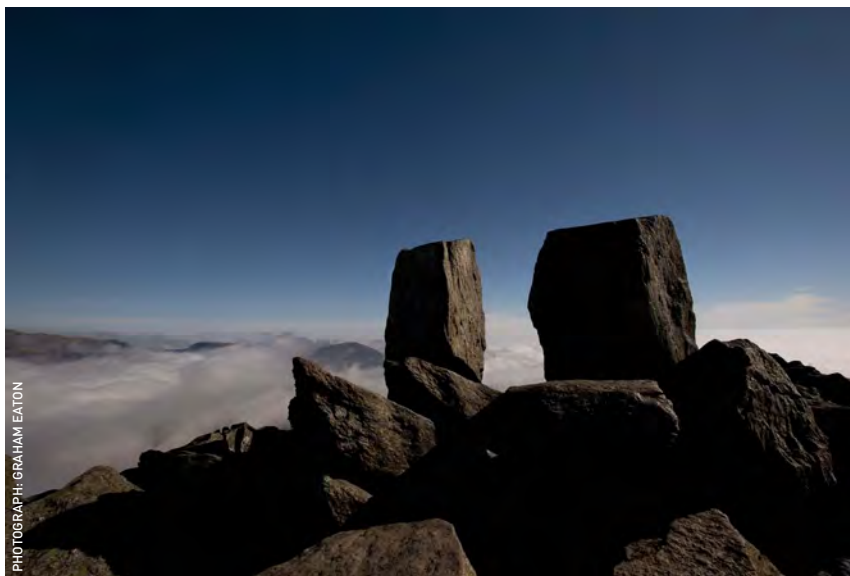
CULTURAL HERITAGE

Of course, no two Award experiences are the same. Whether it involves scouring on hands and knees for the treasured Snowdon Lily, exploring the beaches of the Gower peninsula, or gazing at the wildness of the Brecon Beacons International Dark Sky reserve, each experience is unique to individual participants. But what each Award does

have in common is the opportunity to delve into the rich natural and cultural history that Wales has to offer.

And, often, it is the cultural heritage of Wales that is as much of a draw as its landscape. The Welsh language, in particular, is a huge part of the national identity; with 20% of the population Welsh speakers, the John Muir Trust has made a continued provision of Welsh language resources and training to support Award activity through the medium of Welsh over the past decade.

And celebrating 10 years of Welsh language Award activity in 2014 is a milestone that has been widely appreciated. "It has been great to see the



Stepping stone

"I had no idea that when I completed my John Muir Award whilst visiting Arthog Outdoor Education Centre as a teenager, it would start me down a path that would see me return five years later as a trainee instructor and then run it with my own groups as a lecturer," says Greg Houghton, now the programme leader for sport and public services at Reaseheath College, Cheshire.

"It was my first real experience of exploring wild places," he recalls. "I vividly remember the intensity of how wild it felt on the summit of Cadair Idris with the howling wind and lashing rain. It was so different from the Shropshire hills I grew up on. I knew then that I wanted to learn more about these wild places.

"Returning to Arthog made me realise the extent of the positive impact of the John Muir Award, not just on me and the individual journey of each pupil and their early experiences of wild places, but also the positive action for the environment and the community."

commitment of the John Muir Trust towards the Welsh language with their Welsh resources, certificates and training opportunities," comments Gwydion Tomos at Urdd Gobaith Cymru, the country's largest Welsh language youth organisation.

"The John Muir Award provides a fantastic framework for participants to develop their Welsh language vocabulary; speaking with others and writing creatively on a variety of topics around nature, the environment and how they feel in wild places," adds Bethan Jones, head teacher, Ysgol Y Gwernant in Llangollen. "The framework of the Award and the availability of Welsh language resources have given my teachers the confidence to get outside and use nature as a platform for teaching all of the national curriculum subjects."

On a political level, the John Muir Trust has also offered input to Welsh Government consultations on education

and the national curriculum, working closely alongside the Urdd and the Real World Learning Partnership. The outcome of these consultations will not only shape the future of the national curriculum for both English and Welsh speakers, but also the wider scope of environmental and outdoor learning in Wales.

The John Muir Trust is delighted that the Award is already so actively embraced across Wales, including its six cities, three national parks, many outdoor centres, schools, a quarter of all colleges, plus of course through volunteers, adult groups and families. These organisations and individuals are more than just Award providers; they are a network of supporters with a joint passion at their heart – wild places.

And as the John Muir Trust continues to plant its feet ever more firmly in the Welsh landscape, it does so not as a stranger to these parts, but as an active, long-standing member of the Welsh community. □

Further Info

We are delighted that the Trust's 2015 AGM and Members' Gathering (15-16 May) will take place in Caernarfon on the edge of the Snowdonia National Park. For more details, see the events page on our website.

And if you have been inspired by this article, please do consider contributing to our first ever John Muir Award Appeal and help us continue to change lives, and wild places, for the better. For more, visit www.jmt.org/connect.asp

About the author

Phil Stubbington is John Muir Award manager – Wales. He can be contacted at phil.stubbington@jmt.org



PHOTOGRAPH: MICK BLUNT

Wild window

Locals and visitors alike are celebrating the creation of an outstanding new wildlife observatory in Lewis – a project that the Trust was proud to be involved in, writes **Mick Blunt**

EARLY APRIL can be a difficult time in the Western Isles. Elsewhere in Scotland, leaves and blossom are starting to appear on the trees – reassuring signs that spring has arrived and summer is not far away. But here, in a predominantly treeless landscape, we lack these visual cues and, when bitter westerlies blow in from the Atlantic and the bleached machair fields still show no sign of new growth, it can feel as if the winter will never end.

It was on one such bitterly cold day last year that a crowd of some 50 people gathered in Ness to celebrate the opening of Lewis's newest bird watching facility. As a mixed group of all ages huddled at the entrance of the wonderful new Loch Stiapabhat Wildlife Observatory, eminent Highland wildlife expert Roy Dennis gave a brief speech before, with a broad grin, cutting the tape and officially opening the hide.

The waiting crowd poured into the Tardis-like structure, which accommodated everyone with surprising ease. Large observation windows gave fine views over the freshwater loch, and queues quickly formed behind the line of spotting scopes that volunteers had brought along.

PIT STOP

Located at the northern tip of Lewis, Loch Stiapabhat's insect-rich waters provide a vital fuelling point for countless migratory wildfowl. In spring, ducks, geese and swans call here for a final feed before setting off on an epic flight over the North Atlantic to summer breeding grounds in Iceland and Greenland. Similarly, on their return in early autumn, the loch is the first landfall for those adults and youngsters that survive the perilous crossing.

At the water's edge, tall reeds and rushes border ontocroft fields, providing ideal breeding habitat for corncrake. The

surrounding machair is the best place on Lewis for watching flocks of golden plover, dunlin and lapwing, while the whole reserve is a magnet for raptors – hen harrier, peregrine falcon, buzzard and merlin are regularly spotted hunting over the reed beds and surrounding machair.

On the day of the opening, the choppy water looked cold, uninviting and empty. However, patient viewing revealed numerous wigeon and teal bobbing on the waves, while redshank skulked within the shelter of the reeds. Elsewhere, a small group of muddy whooper swans were spotted feeding amongst the rushes, while a handful of barnacle geese could be seen resting up before the long flight ahead.

It was a great moment – the culmination of 16 months of hard graft by a lot of people, and a fine example of how exciting things can happen when communities, charities and government agencies join forces.

For the last eight years we have worked with Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (the Galson Trust), a community charity that purchased most of north Lewis in 2007. This 22,000ha estate contains one of Britain's finest peatlands, excellent machair grasslands and spectacular stretches of coastline. It is also home to a vibrant and dynamic crofting community. Our support has focussed on enhancing interpretation and promoting wildlife and nature tourism on the estate, demonstrating that you don't have to destroy a natural environment to make a financial return from it.

One issue that cropped up time and again over the years was the dilapidated state of the bird hide at Loch Stiapabhat (incidentally, if you're wondering how it's pronounced, *Shtiapavat* is about right). A small, green timber hut well past its prime, it had never been especially popular. Unfortunately, the

Eyes peeled: (from left): the screened entrance to the new observatory; inside the facility; lapwing is just one of many species spotted from the observatory



hide had been sited too far back from the water's edge, its only users a few keen enthusiasts with high-powered telescopes.

But that was about to change. In January 2013, a small working group consisting of Urras staff, local birdwatchers and representatives from the RSPB and the John Muir Trust came together and decided to do something about this. RSPB officer Robin Reid passed around plans he had drawn up for a great new wildlife observatory. The plan was for a structure twice as large as the existing hide and sited much closer to the edge of the loch to provide fantastic views of the reserve's bird life. It sounded marvellous. All we had to do was find £40,000 ...

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll find it!" Not surprisingly, eyebrows were raised. Have you ever said something only to hear a little internal voice scream "why did you say that ..."? If so, you'll know how I felt on leaving the meeting.

Still, I like a challenge, and through a combination of monotonous form filling, special pleading and – as is often the case with successful fundraising – fortuitously asking the right people at the right time, the promises of support started to come in. Scottish Natural Heritage, Western Isles LEADER, the Galson Trust, RSPB and ourselves (more than £5,000 from our Conservation Fund), all made generous financial and/or in-kind contributions. In the space of three months, much to everybody's amazement (including my own), we had secured the funds needed for the new wildlife observatory. Now we just had to build it.

ALL IN THE TIMING

This was a project where the right people kept appearing at the right time. We needed a team of willing craftsmen who could build the observatory at a reasonable price; who were prepared to work in all weathers; and who could cope with minor problems, such as discovering that the structure's foundations were to be built on six feet of quaking, waterlogged peat.

Up stepped John Archie MacDonald, North Harris Trust board

member, and leader of a council construction skills training scheme. John Archie and his small team had already constructed the North Harris Trust's hugely successful Eagle Observatory, and now proceeded to do the same for us, travelling for up to two hours each way every day, and regularly working in appalling weather that had the rest of us cowering indoors.

The end result is testament to the team's impressive skills. In January 2015, we had the worst storms in the Western Isles for a decade. Many houses lost slates and roof tiles. The observatory is situated in one of the most exposed spots in Lewis, but escaped without a scratch.

Perhaps what makes this project so satisfying is the way that it achieves so many different goals. Local bird watchers, of course, are delighted, but so are many other local people who, although not expert birders, still appreciate the wonderful views of wildlife from the observatory. Meanwhile, school and youth groups now have an excellent nature watching venue on their doorstep, while the facility also hosts several events each year run by the Galson Trust and the Western Isles Natural History Society.

And increasingly, tourists are being drawn to the new hide. There is a huge interest in wildlife amongst visitors to the islands, and this is now one of the best sites in the Hebrides for bird watching. More tourism means more money for local guest houses, hotels, cafés and shops, providing a welcome boost to this fragile rural economy.

The Loch Stiapabhat Wildlife Observatory is open all year round and admission is, of course, free. If you ever visit Lewis (and if you haven't yet, I recommend you do!) make sure you call in and enjoy this wonderful building for yourself. ☐

About the author

Mick Blunt is the Trust's Western Isles area manager. He can be contacted at mick.blunt@jmt.org



Our chosen path

A major project two years in the making, the Trust's path repair work on Blà Bheinn in Skye is now complete. Footpath officer **Chris Goodman** reflects on the work

I FIRST climbed Blà Bheinn in 2012 while undertaking an audit of all the paths on Trust properties. It was a beautiful August day with the sun high in the sky and wide-ranging views of the spectacular scenery all around. But approaching from the car park by Loch Slapin, it wasn't long before my eye was drawn to a starkly visible section of bare ground where this popular route leads up and into Coire Uiganeich.

It was also equally clear what had caused the scar: the combined impact of thousands of boots, fragile surrounding vegetation, and high levels of rainfall had resulted in a strip of bare ground that was about 7 metres wide and around 300m long.

It may sound silly, but I find it useful to

remind myself that this is what a path is – the visible, physical signs of lots of people choosing to walk along the same route, with the resulting trampled vegetation and exposed soils. But while my job title is 'footpath officer', it might be more appropriate if it was 'hillside officer', as it's not the path that I care about so much as the hillside and wider landscape. My job entails keeping the visual and ecological impact of access on the landscape to a minimum so as to safeguard the special qualities that attract people there in the first place.

With that in mind, such a visible scar on Blà Bheinn, for me at least, detracts from the experience of climbing this magnificent outlier of the Cuillin. Although I've not seen historic pictures of the path from

before the Trust took ownership in 1994, local residents in Torrinn tell me that 40 years ago there was barely a path there at all.

So, this seven-metre-wide strip of bare ground had developed in just four decades, as hill walking became increasingly popular. Already at an acute level of damage in 2012, the dynamic processes that had created the bare patch of ground would only have seen the path widen and deteriorate further without intervention.

There's a strong argument though that intervention – the construction of a formal path – also detracts from the experience of climbing hills; it can sanitise and 'urbanise' the experience, so reducing the sense of exploration and



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS GOODMAN

PHOTOGRAPH: UPLAND ACCESS

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PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS GOODMAN

PHOTOGRAPH: UPLAND ACCESS

Mountain fix: contractors from Upland Access battled the elements as they repaired the badly-eroded section of path – work that saw 110 tonnes of stone flown in by helicopter

remoteness that appeals to so many who enjoy wild places. It's therefore a real juggling act to decide what level of erosion is acceptable and if, when and how to intervene.

The Trust strongly supports the 'light touch' approach of minimal intervention, but on a site like this where the path is already in such a serious condition, where huge volumes of water run down the line of the path during heavy rain, and where the steep ground is so loose and mobile, there really isn't a 'light touch' option available.

MAJOR PROJECT

As such, this was a substantial project which took two years to develop and deliver – at a cost of around £60k. It was

only made possible thanks to a significant donation from the James and Patricia Hamilton Charitable Trust, and the support of Trust members and the wider public who together supported our footpath appeal, and also voted for us in the European Outdoor Conservation Association competition in 2014 which generously provided almost half the funding for the project.

Work on the Blà Bheinn path was carried out, often in atrocious conditions, from September to December last year by Upland Access, an experienced upland path contractor. Some 110 tonnes of stone were flown in by helicopter from nearby boulder fields to provide materials with which to construct the drainage features and steps necessary to hold this loose

‘Every attempt has been made to naturalise the work by picking a meandering line and trying to adopt an informal style of stonework’

section of ground together, and ensure that it could withstand the attention of thousands of pairs of boots in the future.

There’s no getting away from it, this was intrusive work that has dramatically changed the appearance of this section of ground. But a lot of time was spent thinking about whether it was justified and how the work could be done in the most sympathetic way possible. Every attempt has been made to naturalise the work by picking a meandering line, avoiding long sections of continuous steps, and trying to adopt an informal style of stonework.

The work will no doubt take a year or two to bed in, and probably require some follow-up tweaks and ongoing maintenance to prevent deterioration, but now the wider area can start to recover and vegetation begin to return. Already, from a distance, the path line is far less visible.

The Trust’s work on Skye follows substantial repairs to the Steall Gorge path in 2012 and 2013, as well as ongoing smaller scale works at Sandwood, Quinag, Ben Nevis and Schiehallion. The path audit in 2012 helped identify, prioritise and cost up the path work needed over the next few years and provide a strategic approach to our work. Home to half of all the paths on Trust land, further repair works will be needed in Skye over the next couple of years, specifically at Druim Hain in Glen Sligachan and Beinn Dearg Mheadhonnach.

And while the Trust continues to raise funds for these major capital repairs, we are also looking ahead to how we manage these paths once the capital restoration work has been undertaken. Maintenance is an ongoing job, while some sections of paths which are ok now will inevitably widen and erode as they continue to evolve and patterns of use change over time. But, by continuing to monitor these paths, keep on top of maintenance – including through the invaluable help of volunteers – and pre-empt significant impacts of recreational access, we hope to avoid the level of erosion that was present on Blà Bheinn, as well as the intrusiveness of the work required to fix it. □

About the author

Chris Goodman is the Trust’s footpath project officer. He can be contacted at: chris.goodman@jmt.org

Help us do more

If you’d like to help us protect our hills and paths, you can donate to the Trust’s ongoing Wild Ways appeal in one of three ways:

- Online at www.jmt.org/wildways.asp
- Call on 01796 470080, or by texting MUIR14 £1 to 70070
- By post to: Wild Ways Path Appeal, John Muir Trust, Tower House, Station Road, Pitlochry PH16 5AN



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS GOODMAN

Spade work: recent path repair work at Sandwood (top) and Steall Gorge (below)



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS GOODMAN



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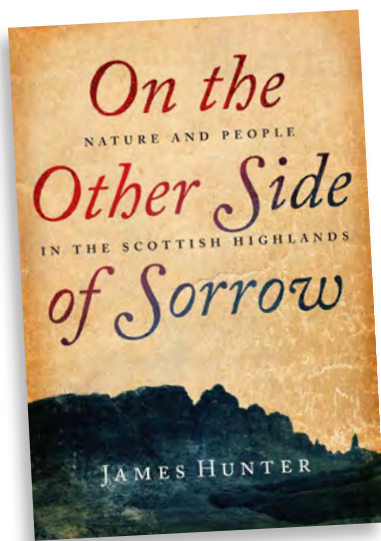
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On the Other Side of Sorrow. Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands, James Hunter. Introduction by Alastair McIntosh

Mike Daniels finds the reprint of James Hunter's powerful text to be as relevant today as when it was first published two decades ago



TWENTY YEARS after its first publication, this seminal work by James Hunter has been re-printed with a new foreword by writer and environmentalist Alastair McIntosh. The central theme of the book – the conflict between conservation and local people in the Highlands – remains highly relevant to the current debate around proposed land reform legislation in Scotland. As Alastair McIntosh reflects, when the book was first published, against the backdrop of the Rio Conference on Biodiversity and the North Assynt Crofters Trust buyout, it seemed like the dawn of a new era for land reform and the environment.

James Hunter's exposé of the cultural

and ecological roots behind these conflicts is compelling. His contention is that the root of the problem lies in a distorted perspective of the Highlands – an external, romanticised, tourist view, initiated by the Ossian poetry of MacPherson, and perpetuated by the writings of Walter Scott and 'Balmoralisation'. He argues that this portrayal was ruthlessly pursued by the British state as part of its 'internal colonisation' of the Highlands following Culloden, which involved the clearances and the shattering of Gaelic culture. This destruction, in turn, led to the severing of the long and deep connection to the land by the Gaels and the replacement of a self-sufficient, environmentally-sensitive cattle system with an industrial-scale sheep economy, leading to the removal and depletion of the Highlands' 'natural capital' – a story all too familiar to conservationists.

His proposed solution to resolve both the cultural disconnect and ecological mismanagement, and hence the conflicts that exist between conservation and economic development, is to restore permanent human presence to the artificially depopulated glens and to return the management of the land to local communities. He writes: 'Just as those who know their social history view the wild, beautiful glens as empty of people, those who know their environmental history view them also as empty of trees! Only when a community is in control of its own place can a community of place flourish and become sustainable.'

In many ways, this solution reflects the thinking behind current land reform proposals that seek to empower local communities with more control over the way land is managed and developed. It is a philosophy the Trust has embraced since its inception through partnerships with community land buy-outs and, more recently, with 'living landscape' projects. However, there is an underlying concern among contemporary conservationists that this approach alone is not guaranteed to deliver the ecological restoration that is urgently needed across the Highlands for nature and people.

There are three main reasons for this. First, there are a number of drivers that govern how land is managed, and that by just changing one (land ownership) but not the others (incentives, regulation and culture), there is no guarantee that better or more sustainable land management will follow. All that may change is who is mismanaging the land.

Second, there is also a need to recognise global factors. It is not just the Highlands that have suffered from rural depopulation. Urbanisation and a growing disconnect from nature (by both urban and rural dwellers) is a world-wide phenomenon. The bright lights of the cities are an irresistible draw for dynamic young people from rural communities which ecological regeneration may not be enough to stem.

Third, and perhaps most controversially, is the growing recognition that at least some places should be entirely for nature. With seven plus billion people and growing, the pressure on all land continues apace. Is it not wise as well as morally responsible to set aside some of the wildest places as land free from human exploitation? Such a vision for the Scottish Highlands would mean the continuing repopulation of the straths, glens and coastal areas where people historically lived and worked, alongside the wilful restoration of nature across more remote upland areas.

One clear message from *The Other Side of Sorrow* is that the Highlands have in the past, and can in the future, support thriving communities alongside a vibrant ecosystem. Everyone who has an interest in land and conservation in the Highlands will gain a deeper understanding of the historical, cultural and ecological complexities of the issues at stake by reading (or re-reading) James Hunter's erudite book.

Price: £12.99

www.birlinn.co.uk

The reviewer

Mike Daniels is the Trust's head of land management. He can be contacted at mike.daniels@jmt.org

Learning with Nature, Marina Robb, Victoria Mew, Anna Richardson

Beautifully presented as a 'how-to' guide to inspire children, *Learning with Nature* is aimed at families, schools, youth groups and anyone working with children. The blurb tells me the activities are suitable for ages 3 to 16 and will help develop practical skills, awareness and respect for the natural world.

The introduction gives context in the form of an intriguing diagram showing an 'extinction of experience' revealed by the decline in roaming radius from home of 8-year-olds from the 1920s (6 miles) to 2007 (700 yards), followed by the benefits of increased time in nature. There's also advice on how to make the most of the book through the art of questioning to nurture curiosity, and a section on Looking after Nature which sets out the interplay between nature and people to allow both

to flourish. I was thinking hard before I got to the activities!

The activities are set out in four themes: games, naturalist, seasonal and survival skills. There's a large range and each activity has clear advice on resources needed (often none, which I like), number of people, age, duration and how to do it. A note on variations and links to similar or complementary activities is helpful. A side box titled *Invisible Learning* gives an idea of what we might expect when using the

Nature's Conscience – the life and legacy of Derek Ratcliffe, Edited by Des Thompson, Hilary Birks and John Birks

Will Williams reflects on a book, to which he contributed, that celebrates the accomplishments of a true champion of the wild

A MAN of many talents, Derek Ratcliffe was a great ecologist, ornithologist and botanist who dedicated his life to conservation in the UK and made a major contribution to the protection and management of many wild areas, especially the Flow Country of Caithness. He was a man who stood up for wildlife and wild places and their rightful place in a civilised society, in the full knowledge that land intensification and industrialisation, together with the emphasis on economic growth, were such a serious threat.



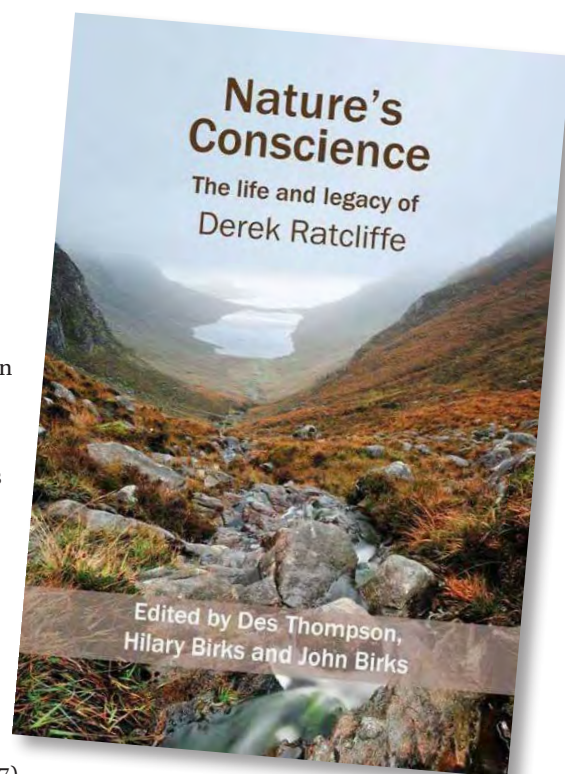
Derek Ratcliffe by Will Williams, from a photograph by Des Thompson

Derek was very much at home in the wild, with an immense knowledge and understanding of the whole spectrum of plants and animals, from mosses and lichens through to peregrines and golden eagles. With meticulous observation and rigorous research, he had a major impact on both government policy and legislation, with his influence on post-war nature conservation policy perhaps most keenly felt following publication of his monumental, two-volume Nature Conservation Review (1977).

While government, organisations and legislation provide the framework, it is individuals such as Derek that make the real difference with their commitment, dedication and determination. We need more like him. Sadly, Derek died in 2005 en route to Lapland, still working on his love of nature at the age of 75.

Derek was well-aware of the achievements of John Muir, and regarded his writings as outstanding contributions to conservation and environmental thinking that were well ahead of their time. He would certainly have approved of the John Muir Trust's work to provide a better chance for nature in many areas that were dear to him.

This book – with a foreword by eminent ornithologist Sir John Lawton – makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the development of nature conservation in Britain. In its pages, naturalists, conservationists, academics, painters, photographers and



friends explore the breadth, qualities, and legacy of Derek's work. The 30 chapters illustrate aspects of his life as a young naturalist, botanist, ornithologist, conservationist and communicator. Each ends with an article written by him.

It was my privilege to have known Derek when he was chief scientist of the Nature Conservancy Council, and I was delighted when the landscape artist David Bellamy and I were invited to contribute a chapter on landscape art and nature. Derek's appreciation of natural beauty was well demonstrated, not only through his love of being in wild places, but also in the wonderful photographs that illustrate his books.

Price: £30/£23 (hardback/softback)
www.langford-press.co.uk

The reviewer

Will Williams is a Trustee of the John Muir Trust. He can be contacted at will.lwlynbedw@gmail.com

activity – advice I found either reinforced my own ideas or alerted me to new possibilities. If the book lacks anything, it's the benefits of using the outdoors from a formal education perspective. However I think those working in this context will easily recognise ways of using these activities in their work.

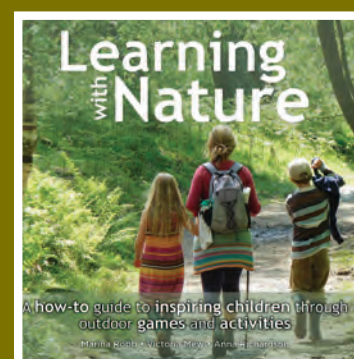
This book is much more than a collection of great activities. It has an aim we can all buy into: to forge 'a heartfelt relationship [with nature] that will renew and inform

our culture, creating love and respect for the natural world.' This is an excellent book for parents, teachers, youth leaders and all those looking to inspire young people with nature. Get a copy and head outdoors!

Price: £14.99 (also available as hardback, ePub, pdf and for Kindle)
www.circleofliferediscovery.com

The reviewer

Graham Watson is John Muir Award regional manager – Cumbria. He can be contacted at graham.watson@jmt.org





Finlay at the start of his record-breaking traverse of the Cuillin Ridge (left); all smiles at the end (right)



Finlay Wild, hill runner

Kevin Lelland spoke with Finlay Wild ahead of the Fort William Mountain Festival to learn about his love of running in wild places – and his remarkable sub-three-hour traverse of Skye’s Cuillin Ridge

How did you first get into hill running?

I started out hill walking around Lochaber where I grew up and later got into climbing and mountaineering at university. I had always been encouraged to head outdoors – my mother was a talented hill runner and my father a mountain guide – so I had a good grounding. As I spent more time climbing and walking in the mountains, it seemed like a natural next step to start running them too. About six years ago, I got more into hill racing, and found that I did quite well – particularly when racing on really rough terrain.

You’ve obviously spent plenty of time in Skye – what makes it so special?

It’s a fantastic place, and very varied. The weather is often less than perfect, but that only adds to the charm of a good day in the Cuillin. There’s something about the mix of alpine-like mountains, intriguing rock features and the blue sea below that makes being up there on a clear day extra special. Also, the Glamaig Hill Race in the Red Cuillin is one of my favourites. It’s very steep and rough, with a scree-run descent. I managed to break the race record a few years ago.

What is the strongest memory of your record-breaking Cuillin Ridge run?

It’s hard to pick out one memory as breaking the record was in many ways a decade-long process of developing as a mountaineer and then runner. But if I had to pick one single memory I would say reaching for the last hold on Naismith’s Route up the Basteir Tooth, which is really

the final climbing section of the ridge run. That’s etched in my mind: the feel, the exposure, and the anticipation of gaining the new record.

How would you describe your relationship with the places you run more generally?

I’ve always been most interested in getting out in the mountains so don’t tend to get as attached to lower level training runs or races on the flat. Living in Fort William, it’s easy to get into the hills proper – not necessarily to a summit, but just somewhere up and out. Quite a common run for me would be up to the CIC Hut at the North Face of Ben Nevis. It’s a place that holds many good memories. I tend to race much better when I’m running in an area I feel strongly about.

Does running in wild places have additional benefits to your health and wellbeing as opposed to just running in of itself?

Absolutely. While I wouldn’t go as far as using the word meditation, running in the hills helps keep me balanced. Many times I’ve had to motivate myself to go for a run after a tiring day at work, but always return refreshed and more clear-headed. Running also allows you to interact with the wilderness more freely, with no heavy boots or rucksack. Several times I’ve run over a rise and surprised a herd of deer. They’re gone quick as a flash, but for a few seconds it can feel almost like I’m running with them.

Do you feel the hill running community is aware of the need to protect wild places? Generally speaking, hill runners aren’t the

types to leave litter or go looking to cause trouble. Obviously, after big races there can be some gel wrappers or bottles left lying about but I don’t think people are throwing these away on purpose. Foot erosion from running I would put in the same category as erosion from walking or other activities – we need to be aware of the issue and try to reduce impact where possible while still allowing people the respectful freedom of the hills. Continuing to protect wild places is of obvious benefit to hill runners.

What’s next for you ... what are your goals for this year?

After the Fort William Mountain Festival, I head to the French Alps for a few weeks to do some Skimo (ski mountaineering) racing – basically hill running with skis on. I’m enjoying getting more into it. Running-wise, I hope to do well in various ‘rough’ Scottish races, as well as getting out for long days with friends. The new Glencoe Skyrace in August looks very tempting. □

Further info

Lochaber Athletic Club member Finlay Wild – a keynote speaker at the Fort William Mountain Festival – has taken the Scottish hill running scene by storm. In October 2013, he set a new speed record for traversing the Cuillin Ridge in Skye in an astonishing 2 hours and 59 minutes – knocking 15 minutes off his own record set in July of the same year. Finlay has also won the gruelling Ben Nevis hill race for the past five years.

About the author

Kevin Lelland is the Trust’s head of communications. He can be contacted at kevin.lelland@jmt.org



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