

JOHN MUIR TRUST

# JOURNAL

75 AUTUMN 2023

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## Land reform

Returning life to the landscape



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PHOTOGRAPHY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): ANDROYD OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE; JOHN MUIR TRUST; DIVYA SINGH RAGHUVANSHI  
COVER: RED SQUIRREL ON OLD PINE STUMP, MARK HAMBLIN/2020VISION

## JOURNAL 75, AUTUMN 2023

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Keep up-to-date with events and local activities at [johnmuirtrust.org](http://johnmuirtrust.org)



# Creative Freedom

**What's your creative response  
to the call of wild places?**

**We invite artists/groups from all disciplines  
and practice to submit work for our first  
Creative Freedom exhibition in Pitlochry's  
Wild Space visitor centre, next spring.**

**Deadline: 30 November 2023.**



**Find out more at  
[johnmuirtrust.org/creativefreedom](https://johnmuirtrust.org/creativefreedom)**

Photograph of Stephen Breslin ©Stephen Blake

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# Making a difference

**THE** spring and summer months are incredibly busy periods for the Trust, with this issue of the *Journal* highlighting some of the many recent activities that will make a difference to the conservation, protection and restoration of the UK's wild places, for the benefit of all.

The Trust first started promoting the idea of a Carbon Emissions Land Tax (CELT) a couple of years ago and I'm happy to say it has since gained significant support. The underlying ambition is to encourage the largest landowners to manage their land in a way that enables Scotland's land to lock up vast amounts of carbon, while also boosting biodiversity and strengthening rural communities.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

This summer we launched a campaign to encourage the Scottish Government to turn this idea into reality. We are pushing hard for CELT to be incorporated into the forthcoming Land Reform Bill, which will make important changes to the framework of law and policy that govern the system of ownership, management and land use in Scotland. You can read more about this in Alan McCombes' article on page 10.

We recently completed a feasibility study, *Reimagining Strathaird*, which included a community consultation on the future of the Trust's land at Strathaird on Skye. We are now undertaking a series of further feasibility studies that will allow us to establish a programme of work for the future development of this area. Look out for an article in the next issue of the

*Journal* which will outline how this work will address some of the key challenges and ambitions of the community at Strathaird.

In June, it was announced that the Trust will take on the interim management of the John Muir Way until September 2024, with an option to then take on or step back from its management in the long-term. One of the UK's great long-distance trails, the John Muir Way is a 134-mile, coast-to-coast route that links John Muir's birthplace in Dunbar in the east of Scotland with Helensburgh in the west, passing through the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park along the way.

With almost 2.5 million people living within 10 miles of the trail, it offers a hugely exciting opportunity for the Trust to engage with a larger and more diverse audience.

Elsewhere, in the Lake District, the Trust has held the management lease for Glenridding Common, which includes the summit of Helvellyn, for the past five years. We are exceptionally proud of the work our local team has done during our stewardship, and very grateful for the many partnerships we have developed locally and with the Lake District National Park Authority.

Our Trustees have, however, decided not to tender for a proposed long-term lease of the site and, as a result, our involvement at Glenridding Common in its current form will end in October. The Trust did not feel able to proceed with submitting a response that could adequately balance the proposed terms for continued management of the site with our objectives as a conservation charity.

As Kevin Lelland explains on page 28, we are pleased to retain our involvement in the Lake District through our work with partners on the hill ground above Thirlmere on the Keswick side of this historic landscape.

Meanwhile, we continue to look for opportunities to work in partnership with others throughout the UK, with several projects at an early stage in development that we hope will also make a difference. □

*Jane Smallman*  
*Chair, John Muir Trust*

# Clear on Deer in focus

## Film roadshow brings the deer management debate to a wider audience

Anybody with even a passing interest in wild places will be aware that deer management is a hot topic these days. It is widely agreed that deer numbers must be reduced, but controversies continue to rage about how – and when – that is achieved.

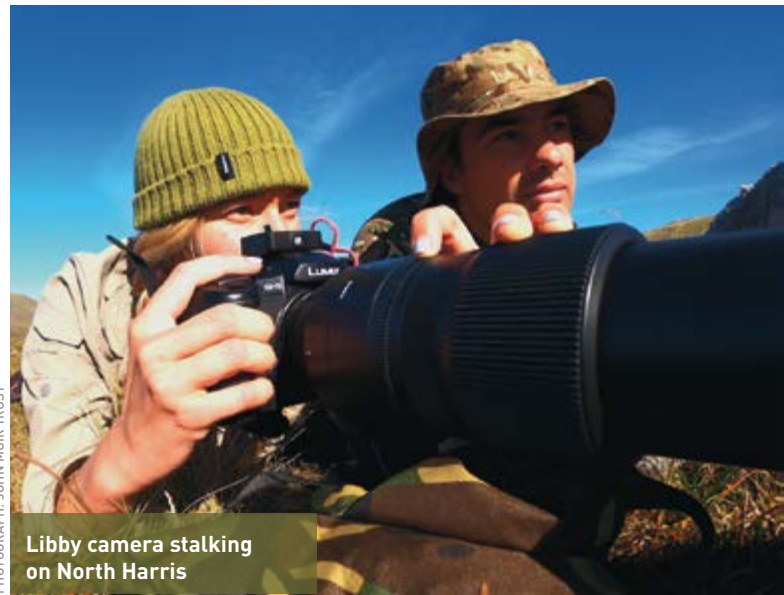
Determined to spread the message more widely, the Trust commissioned wildlife presenter Libby Penman to explore different sides of the debate. The resulting 30-minute documentary – *Clear on Deer* – sees Libby journey across Scotland to talk to landowners, conservationists, animal welfare organisations and rural communities.

Her conversations reveal how the natural balance of deer numbers has been lost, and asks what we can do about the unnaturally high numbers impacting our landscape, our environment and our contribution towards climate targets.

Like most people, Libby doesn't live in an area with a deer population and admitted she could easily have been outraged and upset by headlines emerging from mass deer cull.

"I simply wasn't aware of the wider issues," she commented. "It felt really important to be part of a project that sought to raise awareness around deer – for people exactly like me."

Libby is rightly proud of her work researching, producing and presenting *Clear on Deer*, and is keen that the film reaches as wide an audience as possible – as is the Trust. The film is now touring venues across the UK,



Libby camera stalking on North Harris

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

with public showings followed by a live Q&A featuring a range of guest speakers.

The tour began in Bristol in September, with the roadshow's final date at the Kendal Mountain Festival in November.

The film has attracted a diverse audience to date, from informed Trust Members to interested individuals who'd never been involved with us (or the subject) before, plus those with shooting interests.

"People have been very engaged in the issues, with some insightful conversations and robust debate," commented Ross Brannigan, the Trust's Membership Officer. "There has been positive feedback overall, including from those opposed to some of our views who said they respected that we had created the space for discussion."

We hope you will be able to attend one of the screenings or see the film when made available on the Trust website later this year. Find out more at [johnmuirtrust.org/clearondeer](http://johnmuirtrust.org/clearondeer)

## US recognition for Trust

Earlier this year, California's John Muir Association named the John Muir Trust as the recipient of its '2022 Conservation Award – Non-Profit Organization'. Based at the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez, California, the Association aims to celebrate the lasting legacy of John Muir.

Board Member Susan Garbarino visited Glasgow this summer, where she presented the Conservation Award to our John Muir Award Scotland Manager Toby Clark (pictured), who was delighted to accept on behalf of the Trust.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

## Wild Space hosts 40th celebration

Trust friends reunited in Pitlochry's Wild Space this August for a fun afternoon of reminiscing, looking to the future and raising a glass to four decades of caring for wild places.

Members, supporters and guests joined staff and Trustees for an informal drinks reception; tour of our 40th celebration exhibition 'What's the future for wild places?' and a private viewing of our new film *Clear on Deer* followed by a Q&A with the team.

Trust Chair Jane Smallman talked about some of our recent initiatives and thanked Denis Mollison and his fellow founders for their vision 40 years ago, which we plan to continue developing for at least the next 40 years.

# Support grows for CELT

## Poll shows near five to one majority support for proposed Carbon Emissions Land Tax

The Trust's campaign for a Carbon Emissions Land Tax (CELT) is gathering pace. We've led efforts to have this potentially transformative proposal included in a new Land Reform Bill due to come before Parliament next year, and we're working hard to build that case.

Over the summer, our work has attracted support from a growing coalition of community groups, trade unions, churches and charities representing over a million people. These include organisations such as Oxfam, the Quakers, the Scottish Community Alliance, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, and the Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland, also allying with members of the business community to press for the introduction of CELT.



The idea is popular with the general public too. A recent YouGov poll, commissioned by the Trust, showed strong support for a carbon emissions tax on the biggest landholdings, with 64 per cent of people in favour and only 14 per cent opposed to the proposal.

The poll found a resounding majority of the 1,000 voters across all eight Scottish Parliamentary regions and all age groups wanted a carbon emissions tax. This opinion held true for a significant majority of voters across all political affiliations apart from the Scottish Conservatives. From the supporters of that party, those in favour of the tax still

outnumbered those against.

"I hope this YouGov poll gives our parliamentarians the confidence to act boldly," commented Mike Daniels, the Trust's Head of Policy. "It's clear there is public appetite for fiscal measures to compel big landowners to face up to their responsibilities and manage their land in the wider public interest."

The poll also found overwhelming support for landowners to take responsibility for improving nature, minimising climate damage and strengthening communities. Almost 80 per cent of voters agreed landowners who produce polluting greenhouse gases should pay the costs resulting from it.

Under the proposal, public sector, private landowners and NGOs in Scotland with holdings over 1,000 hectares would be liable for the tax, though all community-owned land would be exempt.

"Delivering on international commitments to tackle the climate emergency needs bold action, and introducing CELT will be significant in achieving those crucial emissions targets," added Mike.

If the draft legislation is introduced in alignment with the Trust's proposal, Mike does not believe CELT will be punitive. "Landowners can minimise their carbon emissions and potential land tax obligation through ecologically sound land management practices such as native tree planting, restoration of peatlands and a range of other initiatives," he explained.

"That's good news for all, especially as most measures of this kind are already incentivised through grants and other governmental support."

For more information, visit [johnmuirtrust.org/celt](http://johnmuirtrust.org/celt)

## John Muir Way

The Trust took over interim management of the John Muir Way on 1 September 2023. Our aim is to establish a new governance and management model for Scotland's 134-mile coast to coast route. To help us, we are recruiting a Projects and Relationships Officer and the outcome of the project will influence the decision we make about whether we take on a longer-term management role.

## Langholm visit

Members of our Board had the chance to witness the progress Langholm's Tarras Valley Nature Reserve has made since the Trust and supporters helped the community buy-out in two stages over the past few years. On a visit in mid-July, they saw the differences that are already being made and learned about some excellent opportunities for community engagement.

## Growing Glenlude

Plans to expand native woodland at Glenlude have received a funding boost thanks to Rewilding Britain's Rewilding Innovation Fund. The money will help us assess the potential to support a diverse mosaic of habitats at the site in the Scottish Borders. The Growing Glenlude scoping study will enable us to estimate the costs and timeframes associated with the options identified and will guide a long-term forest plan.

## AGM reminder

Our 40th Annual General Meeting (AGM) will take place online on Saturday 4 November 2023. Members have received details of how to register and are asked to do so before 20 October 2023. Find out more at [johnmuirtrust.org/agm2023](http://johnmuirtrust.org/agm2023)

## Consultation responses

### Telecoms masts

The John Muir Trust, Mountaineering Scotland and eight other organisations representing community, environmental and outdoor recreation interests have signed up to a joint position statement in response to the UK Government's Shared Rural Network programme.

In summary, we have suggested that the programme could be improved by: consulting with rural communities to establish their needs first; avoiding constructing new access tracks unless no other method is possible; adequately resourcing local planning authorities; avoiding the UK's most sensitive wild places; and insisting the operators share mast infrastructure, rather than building adjacent masts.

### Gated community plan

More than 80,000 people have signed a petition to put a halt to US firm Discovery Land Company's (DLC) plans to convert Taymouth Castle, the neighbouring Glenlyon Estate, and properties in the nearby village of Kenmore in Perthshire into an exclusive members club.

Trust Protection Officer Fiona Baille said: "It is difficult to see how DLC can achieve the kind of exclusivity they appear to be aiming for without restricting access. The potential for a precedent to be set on what is acceptable under our access legislation makes this development a nationally important issue."

The concept of a gated community, which is how the DLC development is being described, could signal a regression in land ownership in Scotland and demonstrates the need for more ambitious land reform.

The Trust would like to see the Scottish Government introduce a public interest test for large scale land transfers; a legal duty to comply with the Land Rights and Responsibilities principles; and the implementation of a Carbon Emissions Land Tax to incentivise land use change in favour of nature and the climate.

### Wind farm objections

The Trust is disappointed to see that an application to extend the Achany Wind Farm near Lairg in Sutherland was approved by Scottish Ministers on 22 May 2023. Our concerns about the development largely revolve around the negative impact it will have on the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area and the high-quality peat on which it is sited.

We have raised similar objections to the proposed Glen Ullinish II Wind Farm on the Isle of Skye. It is estimated that the development would require up to 613,417m<sup>3</sup> of peat excavation in an area largely comprised of nationally important Class 1 peatland.



## Signing up to Nature 2030

The Trust is supporting Wildlife and Countryside LINK's Nature 2030 campaign and calls on all the UK's main political parties to adopt five asks for nature's restoration by 2030, ahead of the next General Election.

In 2021 the UK Government committed to halt biodiversity loss by 2030. It followed that up with a target to reverse the decline in species abundance by the end of 2030 in the Environment Act (2021) – legislation that has become the UK's new framework for environmental protection.

However, YouGov research shows the public is unimpressed with the government's performance on the environment and wants politicians to be more ambitious.

The Trust supports the five campaign asks as policy foundations for wilder places all over the UK. In summary, the asks are to: double the support for farmers so they can deliver nature-friendly farming and nature restoration; implement the polluters pay principles with new duties on businesses to invest in nature's recovery; create more space for nature and restore more protected sites and landscapes by 2030, and create a Public Nature Estate in England; create more green jobs through a National Nature Service; and establish a Right to a Healthy Environment.

## Nevis path repairs begin

Thanks to the generosity of everyone who donated to our Ben Nevis Path Appeal – with special mention to The Big Give Green Match Fund, Brown Forbes Memorial Fund, the Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust and Mrs M. Thin – we can fix the path to the summit.

The funds raised mean our contractors ACT Heritage can start work at several locations above 700m (on the Zig Zags, between the Red Burn crossing and on the summit) by arranging for a helicopter to lift approximately 50 tonnes of stone to 10 different work sites.



Work can now start on key Nevis path repair work





Artist Liz Myhill is a member of the Creative Freedom panel

## Creative Freedom call

This autumn we invite all writers, photographers, sculptors, videographers, podcasters and outdoor enthusiasts to submit their creative response to the idea of 'freedom for wild places' before 30 November 2023.

The best entries will feature in our first Creative Freedom exhibition in Pitlochry's Wild Space visitor centre next spring. As well as selecting a favourite submission in each category, our panel of six working artists will pick one outstanding entry to receive an artist-in-residency opportunity with the Trust.

For more, visit [johnmuirtrust.org/creativefreedom](http://johnmuirtrust.org/creativefreedom)

PHOTOGRAPH: LIZ MYHILL

# Seasonal rangers help out

NatureScot's Better Places Green Recovery Fund enabled the Trust to hire a terrific trio of seasonal rangers to help look after some of our busiest sites this summer.

On Ben Nevis, Jenny Eyre helped our team and volunteers to carry down 90kg of litter from the summit and a further 89kg from Steall Gorge and the meadow. As well as encouraging our visitors to leave no trace, Jenny also assisted with wildlife and peatland monitoring and was present when the team discovered a rare northern emerald dragonfly.

A particularly dry June kept Ben Smith busy engaging with visitors to Skye about the threat of poorly sited campfires setting fire to restored peatland near

Blà Bheinn. The problem of marine litter encouraged Ben to look into the source of so-called 'ghost gear' and resulted in a report on our website (see abridged version on page 18). He also worked with volunteers and the community to clean up Camasunary beach.

At Sandwood, Janine Finlay focused on keeping the sites clean for everyone to enjoy and assisted with recording and observing local flora and fauna. While the effects of bird flu, declining wildlife populations and cleaning up a firepit containing hundreds of nails from fencing posts wasn't much fun, she enjoyed watching the machair recover at Sheigra due to a new 'no-vehicle' zone.

Beach clean at Camasunary Bay, Skye



PHOTOGRAPH: BEN SMITH

# Carrot and stick

Following the Scottish Government's consultation on a draft Land Reform Bill, **Alan McCombes** explores why change in land ownership and management in Scotland is long overdue

**IN 1909**, a radical journalist called Thomas Johnston, who decades later would become Secretary of State for Scotland in Churchill's wartime coalition cabinet, wrote a book called *Our Scots Noble Families*, a scathing polemic against landed power in Scotland that sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It ignited a national debate on land reform in Scotland which has raged on, at varying degrees of intensity, right up until the present day.

Some things have changed over the generations. In Johnston's time, Scotland's giant landholdings were overwhelmingly in the hands of the traditional aristocracy, whose properties had been handed down intact from one generation to the next, usually to the oldest son of the family.

The old nobility remains a major bastion of rural landownership in Scotland to this day; names such as the Duke of Buccleuch, the Duke of Atholl, the Duke of Roxburghe, the Duke of Westminster, the Earl of Seafield, the Royal Family, the Countess of Sutherland and the Marquess of Bute all feature high in the league table of Scotland's biggest landowners. A quarter of Scottish landowning families have held their properties since the 16th century or earlier.

Today, however, a Highland laird is as likely to be a Middle Eastern oil tycoon, a city of London banker, a Russian oligarch, a Scandinavian entrepreneur, a German industrialist or a faceless corporate investment trust. Around 12.5 per cent of Scottish land is owned by public bodies. A further 5.5 per cent is owned by environmental NGOs and communities. Farmers and small holdings account for 25 per cent. The rest – 57 per cent of Scotland's total landmass – consists of large, private estates. According to the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, 1,125 big private estates own over four million hectares.

Does this matter? Scottish Land & Estates, the umbrella body for Scotland's landowners, often uses the phrase, 'it's not who owns land that

matters, it's how its managed.' This sentiment is sometimes echoed by environmentalists whose focus is on protecting and restoring ecosystems rather than on social justice. It is likely that within the broad membership of the Trust, there will be some sympathy with that view.

On the face of it, the point seems reasonable. After all, some private landowners, large and small, manage their properties in an exemplary way – welcoming public access, working to restore nature, cooperating with communities, providing housing and creating jobs. And conversely, the non-private landowning sector is far from perfect. During much of the 20th century, the state-owned Forestry Commission covered extensive areas of Scotland's uplands with dense plantations of non-native Sitka spruce, in doing so damaging important peatlands and ecosystems.

Meanwhile, landowning environmental NGOs, while generally strong on ecological objectives, have not always been sensitive to the needs of local people. And community landownership has run into problems in some

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL SOUTER



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST



PHOTOGRAPH: ZEEMON ERHARDT



Higher state: the community-owned Knoydart Foundation has run the former Knoydart Estate since 1999 (see launch, below); peatland restoration, Glen Nevis (below)



areas, in part due to the harsh economics involved in managing large areas of upland with little economic value.

But dig deeper and a clear pattern emerges. For every progressive private landowner who manages their property in the public interest, many more are motivated by private priorities. Even amid the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies, sport shooting of red deer and grouse, which brings with it environmental, social and economic costs, remains the dominant land use across millions of hectares of privately owned land in Scotland.

That is changing, albeit slowly. But within the private landowning sector, change tends to be driven primarily for private gain rather than for public benefit. Hence, the rapid expansion of renewables across Scotland's wilder landscapes over the past two decades has been double edged: while it has contributed to the key public objective of decarbonising electricity generation, it has also enriched private landowners and power companies, driven up land prices, closed down opportunities for local renewable energy generation and

damaged landscapes and ecosystems.

Had landownership patterns in Scotland's uplands been less monopolistic, it is likely that the shift to renewable electricity would have been more consensual, with benefits spread more widely, and natural habitats afforded greater respect and protection.

## CARBON MARKET

The emerging carbon market is now threatening to repeat some of the same failings. The respected writer, environmentalist and land campaigner Alastair McIntosh recently published a paper called *The Cheviot, the Stag and Black, Black Carbon* (a title inspired by the landmark 1975 John McGrath play about the history of the Highlands), which seeks to unravel the intricacies of green finance and carbon offsetting.

Land prices across rural Scotland are reported to be rising rapidly as investors buy up properties for what are dubiously described as 'rewilding' projects. The irony of the description lies in the fact that natural regeneration is being sidelined in favour



of quick-fix tree planting schemes, including fast growing Sitka, behind deer fences.

At the same time, almost all of these initiatives are being driven from the outside, with little or no involvement of local communities and with an expectation that future proceeds from the sales of timber and carbon credits will flow exclusively, or at least overwhelmingly, into the bank accounts of private landowners and investors.

As Alastair McIntosh points out: “The road to green nirvana is paved with good intentions, but with traps and trolls along the way that can subtly undermine well-intentioned effort. What look like simple solutions can prove, with hindsight, to have been simplistic, leaving others to suffer their unintended consequences further down the road.”

This new upsurge in the land market reveals a bitter paradox. A more diversified pattern of landownership could ensure that future financial benefits from green investment are shared more widely. But the markets are already gathering pace, and land prices are spiralling out of control, making it more difficult than ever for communities to acquire the land from which they could potentially benefit.

For many in rural areas, it feels that land reform is not just overdue – it is in danger of being left standing on the platform as the express train speeds off, destination unknown.

Land reform is not just about economic equity: it is also about democracy, responsibility and power. “Anyone from anywhere in the world with deep pockets can buy as much land as they want in Scotland and do more or less what they want with minimal regulation,” says sustainable land use expert, Calum MacLeod. “Large-scale landownership gives a small number of private individuals tremendous power at local level. Their land management decisions have far-reaching consequences. In rural areas, they often control a significant proportion of local employment, business contracts, housing and much more. There are progressive



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

### “Land reform is not just about economic equity: it is also about democracy, responsibility and power”

landowners, but such concentrated power leaves local communities at the mercy of a lottery.”

Nor does individual large-scale landownership guarantee long-term stability. Private landowners come and go, by buying and selling their land or passing it on to future generations. Either way, priorities can change along with the title deeds. Community, charity and public-owned land are all, to one degree or another, subject to some measure of accountability. They are also more likely to be in it for the long haul.

Community landowners have been contributing to climate and biodiversity objectives for many years and without any pot of gold waiting at the end of the rainbow, points out Ailsa Raeburn, Chair of Community Land Scotland. “They’ve been planting trees, restoring peatlands and managing land responsibly for a long time. They’re also addressing behaviour change locally, which is absolutely critical for [combatting] climate change. Reuse, recycling, insulation, active travel, electric car charging points – these are all part of what community landowners do routinely.”

Communities also see the broader picture, she believes. “They don’t just come in, plant trees, sell carbon offsets then move on. They’re thinking always about their children



PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID LINTERN

Land use (clockwise from top): wind turbines at Stronelaig; muirburn; woodland regeneration at community-owned Langholm Moor

and their children’s children, and ensuring that the land they manage will be looked after for future generations.”

### BROAD SUPPORT

There is widespread support for the key principles of land reform. In a 2021 survey of 1,500 people carried out by the Scottish Government – *Attitudes to Land Reform* – 71 per cent expressed support for the aim of diversifying landownership, with only 7 per cent opposed. But it is always easier to identify a problem than it is to devise a solution. There is no silver bullet that will shatter a construct that has been entrenched for centuries.

Recently, the Scottish Labour MSP Mercedes Villalba floated the idea of a presumed 500-hectare cap on private ownership as part of a proposed bill that included a range of other measures. The Trust responded positively to some of her policy proposals and recognised that there may, at some point, be a case



PHOTOGRAPH: KEVIN LELLAND



for a presumed limit on individual landholdings.

But as things stand, there are huge political, social, economic and geographical obstacles to implementing such a policy. Most of Scotland's landmass consists of mountains and moorland of low agricultural productivity. Managing these areas can involve major running costs, including staff on the ground, contractors, equipment and other expenditure, and offers little or no short-term financial return.

Certain land classifications may be more suitable than others for subdivision into smaller units, but in some instances – such as rugged mountainous landscapes – land reform may be better served by charity or public ownership, or by new partnerships that bring together communities, NGOs and public agencies.

The land reform debate is not about opposing private landownership: it is about finding

ways of diversifying land ownership so that a greater number of people, especially those living and working on the land, have a direct stake in that land, and real influence over how it is used. Current 'traditional' land uses employ very small numbers of people over vast areas managed for single species – grouse, deer or sheep. In time, restored, diverse, healthy landscapes could employ far more people in many more sustainable activities while boosting biodiversity and protecting precious wild places.

Land reform is also about changing entrenched management practices that have had detrimental consequences over many centuries on both the natural environment and on rural society. It has multiple potential strands: regulation of land markets; legal obligations on large landowners to manage their estates responsibly; transparency of ownership; public interest tests for large-scale transactions; taxation; the role of public subsidies; reform of inheritance laws; new models of ownership.

In the coming months, the Scottish Government will bring forward a draft Land Reform Bill covering many of these areas. The Trust engaged in depth with the public consultation that will help shape the draft bill. While supporting the general direction of travel, and strongly supporting many of the specific measures proposed in the consultation paper, we urged greater ambition, especially around a proposed 3,000-hectare threshold for landholdings to be liable for regulation.

We argued that this figure should

be reduced to 1,000 hectares, which would mean that more than half of Scotland's land would be subject to greater scrutiny and obliged to work in the public interest. We also proposed greater clarity in the definition of what constitutes public interest when assessing land use.

In addition, we have raised the idea of taxation to accelerate behavioural change on the part of Scotland's largest landowners. The idea is rapidly gaining momentum, with dozens of organisations, including charities, trade unions, climate campaigners and community groups backing our proposal for a carbon emissions land tax. In a YouGov poll commissioned by the Trust in August 2023, a majority of almost five to one (excluding don't knows) expressed support for the principle (see news story on page 7).

"Much of Scotland's land, especially in the uplands, is failing to pull its weight in helping the nation deliver climate and biodiversity targets," notes Mike Daniels, the Trust's Head of Policy. "There are incentives available to landowners for woodland creation and peatland restoration. But to achieve real change at scale, we need sticks as well as carrots."

At the heart of the debate is the realisation that neither the nation as a whole, nor the local communities scattered around rural Scotland, have been well-served by the landownership structures that have reigned supreme over the past 250 years. Despite broad public support for reform there is also resistance. Change is coming – that is inevitable. The big question that the Scottish Government will need to answer in the next year is whether that change will be bold and ambitious or cautious and half-hearted.

The Trust will be watching developments closely and advocating that whatever change happens, it improves both the management *and* the ownership of land, including our finite wild places. □

#### **About the author**

*Alan McCombes is the Trust's Public Affairs Advisor*

# Park progression

**Nikki Sinclair** explores plans to introduce at least one new National Park in Scotland by spring 2026 and their wider role in helping to achieve net zero and restore biodiversity throughout the UK

**TODAY**, the UK has 15 National Parks: 10 in England, three in Wales and just two in Scotland. But now, a decade on from the publication of *Unfinished Business*, a joint report from the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (SCNP) and Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS), that is about to change.

Having recognised the social and economic benefits that National Parks can bring, as well as their enhanced role in protecting and enhancing biodiversity and addressing the climate emergency, the Scottish Government has committed to designating at least one new National Park by May 2026.

It's a key development. Despite hopeful steps forward, such as the adoption of the Global Biodiversity Framework in December 2022 and commitments by both the UK and Scottish governments to protect 30 per cent of our land and seas by 2030, concerns remain about the extent and effectiveness of protected areas to safeguard nature in the UK.

Some of these concerns, and how strengthened National Parks could help address them, were considered in Scottish Environment LINK's recent report *Protecting 30 per cent of Scotland's Land and Sea for Nature* – a document that, alongside growing public concern about biodiversity and climate change, has influenced how the process for the creation of new National Parks has developed since 2021.

## STRONG COMMITMENT

In Scotland, the commitment to designate one or more new National Parks in the current parliamentary session was first made in the 2021 Bute House Agreement. The Scottish Government also made clear that any new National Park should only be designated in response to local community demand.

The expectation that National Parks should play a leadership role in nature recovery and a just transition to net zero was later reinforced by its inclusion as one of the priority actions for 2030 in the new *Scottish Biodiversity Strategy*, published in December 2022.

The additional stipulations, beyond designating new National Parks under the statutory process set out in the National Parks

(Scotland) Act 2000, mean that there are now two prongs to the new National Parks process. Firstly, Scotland will follow a novel public nomination process, with community groups able to suggest areas they consider worthy of National Park status.

Secondly, the Scottish Government will consult on a draft Natural Environment Bill which will contain statutory targets for nature restoration and potential changes to the aims, purpose, powers and governance of all National Parks, whether existing or new.

The proposed amendments to legislation may include changes to the arrangements for National Park Authorities – suggested following the experience of more than 20 years of operation of the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs and the Cairngorms National Parks – and the functions of other public bodies operating in National Parks.

Reaching this point has already involved several rounds of public consultation. The first, undertaken by the Scottish Government in spring 2022, included seeking early suggestions of where new National Parks might be located, before NatureScot undertook significant work to refine expectations around the role of future National Parks and examine any changes to their aims and powers.

NatureScot subsequently submitted its National Parks Advice to Ministers in February 2023, while the Scottish Government also concluded a further public consultation on a draft appraisal framework and a broad set of criteria to help with the selection of new National Parks. It is anticipated that the final version of the appraisal framework will be published ahead of the launch of the nominations phase in October of this year.

## PUBLIC NOMINATIONS

A decade ago, SCNP/APRS identified seven areas of Scotland that it considered merited consideration for designation – despite being aware, given Scotland's wealth of beautiful and varied landscapes, that a similar case could be made for other areas. Subsequently, in two of the seven areas – Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders – sustained local campaigns for National Park status developed, while in Harris there was a short-lived local campaign for a

PHOTOGRAPH: ARDROY OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE



PHOTOGRAPH: ARDROY OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE



Primary school children learning and enjoying time in Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park (main and inset)



new park which fizzled out without the support of the local council.

The Scottish Government has emphasised that the nominations process will be open to established groups and for areas where the concept and local support for a new National Park is only developing now that the commitment to create more parks has been confirmed. It also plans to offer support to nominees to undertake the process if they request it.

For groups interested in their area becoming a National Park, or even just exploring the possibility, the Scottish Government has opened a register of interest so that they can keep people informed about what is happening ahead of a nominations phase that is expected to last for five months.

If a group does not register they could still make a nomination; similarly, registering an early interest does not mean that they have to

### **“Scotland will follow a novel public nomination process, with community groups able to suggest areas considered worthy of National Park status”**

go on to make a nomination. Several local authorities in Scotland have now indicated that they will promote the nominations process in their area and/or will consider supporting forthcoming nominations.

Areas that are successfully nominated and selected to be proposed as new National Parks during 2024 will then go through the statutory reporting processes in order for the designation of any new National Parks to happen by 2026. It will then be for Ministers, and ultimately the Scottish Parliament, to decide which area or areas are designated as the country’s next National Park or Parks.

Of course, some candidate areas may be unsuccessful. But immediate designation as a National Park is not the only way that an area might benefit from this exercise. Quite apart from the hope – expressed by NatureScot in its advice earlier this year – that there could be a



PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREW SPROULE/ADOBE STOCK

pipeline of new National Parks for future designation, there are other options. The Scottish Government has already stated that it may seek to contact unsuccessful nominating groups to discuss their submission and any viable alternative designation options, particularly where there is the potential to make a significant contribution to nature restoration and climate mitigation in the area.

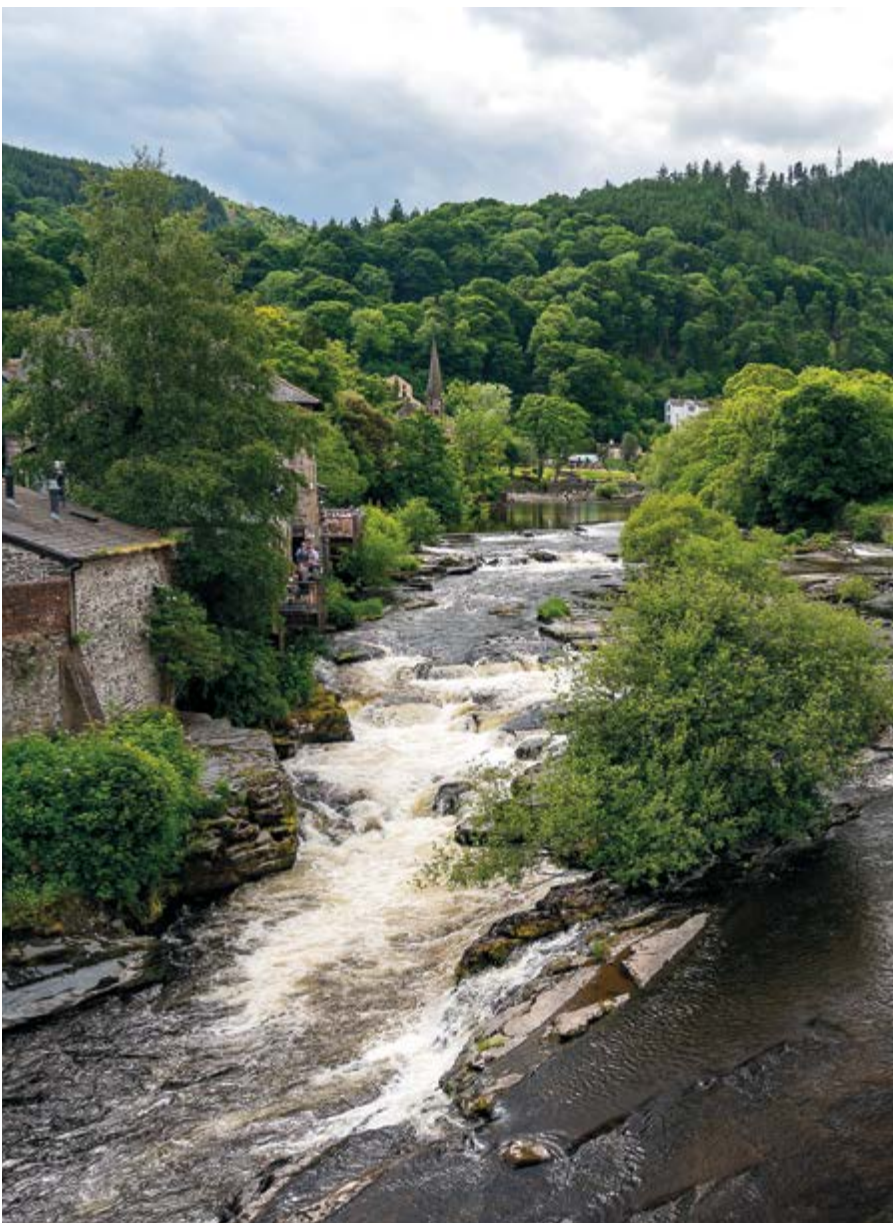
### STIRRINGS ELSEWHERE

Elsewhere, the Welsh Government has also signalled its intention to create a new National Park – Wales's fourth – within the next few years. Natural Resources Wales (NRW) has been commissioned to undertake what is known as the North East Wales National Park Designation Project to consider the potential designation of a new National Park based on the existing Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

As a result, a landscape designation evaluation process must now be undertaken by NRW to consider the proposed area against the statutory criteria for designation as a National Park. Despite the consideration of only one area, it is unlikely that designation could take place before 2026.

The moves to create new National Parks in Scotland and Wales, and in Scotland's case to strengthen their role in supporting biodiversity and combating climate change, come at a time when similar debates over policy have been happening elsewhere in the UK – although these are being played out via very different processes.

The legislation on National Parks in England and Wales is much older, but there has so far been less appetite in government to modernise it. This is despite the findings of the Landscapes Review of National Parks and AONBs in



PHOTOGRAPH: ALISA/ADOBE STOCK

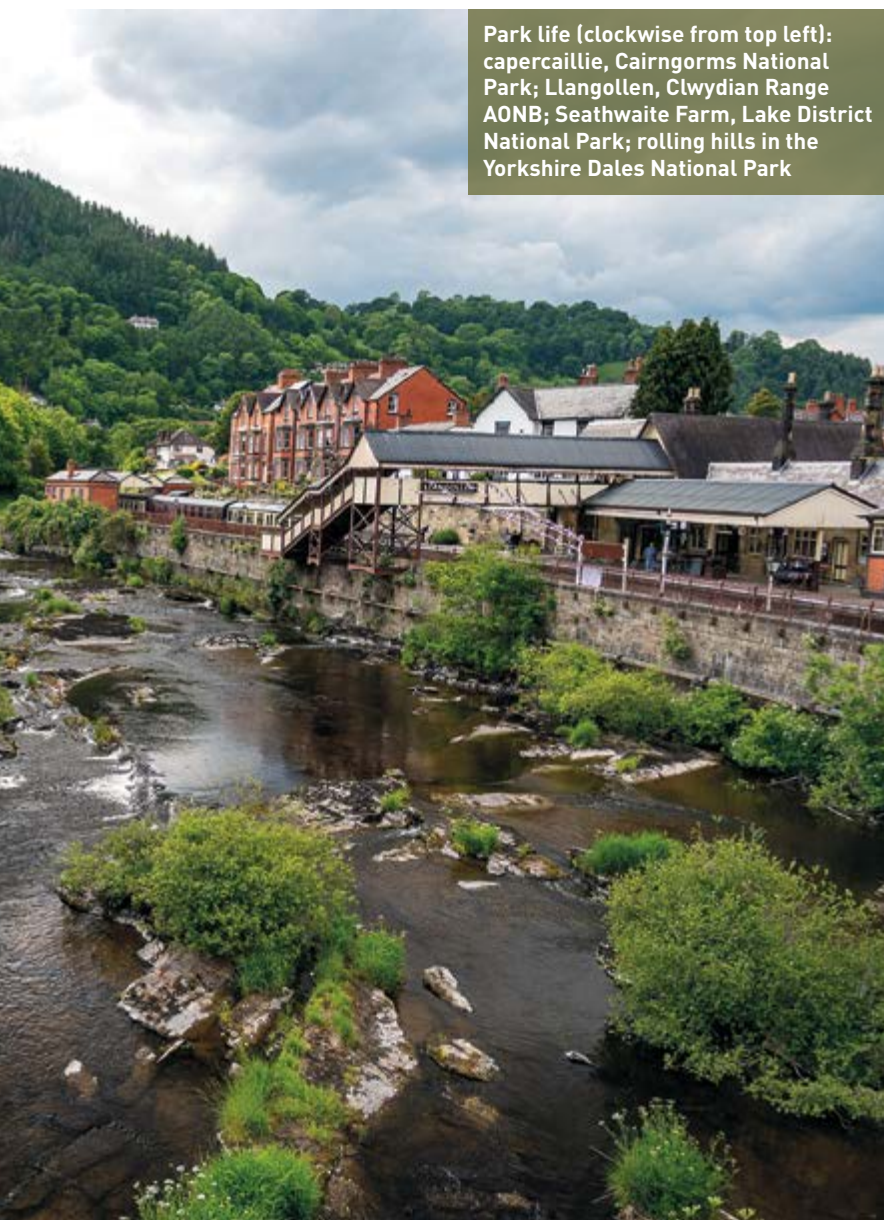
England, 2019 – the so-called *Glover Review*, which was commissioned by the UK Government as part of its 25-Year Environment Plan.

The review called for protected landscapes to become exemplars of International Union for Conservation of Nature Category V protected areas. Achieving this would require the UK Government to place greater priority on nature conservation within these landscapes. As in Scotland, without this happening it is questionable as to how much of these areas can legitimately be considered to contribute towards protected area coverage metrics against the international targets and commitments that have been made.

The *Glover Review* highlighted these issues and included measures to address them among a wider-ranging package of recommendations. The majority of the



Park life (clockwise from top left): capercaillie, Cairngorms National Park; Llangollen, Clwydian Range AONB; Seathwaite Farm, Lake District National Park; rolling hills in the Yorkshire Dales National Park



**“Despite much behind-the-scenes work and strong support from many Peers during the final scrutiny of proposed amendments to the bill in the Lords, the government rejected the amendments”**

proposals were accepted by the UK Government in its published response to the review in January 2022 but not acted upon.

The Campaign for National Parks (CNP) has since led a strong campaign along with the Coalition for Better Planning for amendments to the 50-year-old National Parks legislation as part of the government’s Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, with backing from numerous scientists and environmental NGOs.

Despite much behind-the-scenes work and strong support from many Peers during the final scrutiny of proposed amendments to the bill in the Lords, the government rejected the amendments. This means there will be no progress on this ahead of a general election, despite the widespread recognition that the next few years are vital for meeting the commitment to protect 30 per cent of England for nature by 2030, for halting the decline in

species abundance and making progress towards net zero.

CNP and Wildlife and Countryside Link (of which the John Muir Trust is one of 76 members) are now pushing for political parties to commit to making changes in their manifestos under the banner of a campaign called Nature 2030. The message is that now, more than ever, nature needs action not words. □

#### ***Further information***

*APRS and SCNP have jointly campaigned for many years for the protection and enhancement of Scotland’s landscapes and called for the creation of more National Parks. For more, visit [aprs.scot](http://aprs.scot) and [scnp.org.uk](http://scnp.org.uk)*

#### ***About the author***

*Nikki Sinclair is Project Manager for the joint SCNP/APRS National Parks Project.*



Striking views over Loch Slapin to Blà Bheinn but Skye's coastal waters are often blighted by marine litter

# What lies beneath?

**Skye Seasonal Ranger Ben Smith explores an all-too-real problem that's polluting Britain's coastlines – marine plastics, also known as 'ghost gear'**

ONE of the joys of my summer job as Seasonal Ranger on Skye is exploring this dramatic coastline that acts as a natural boundary for the land managed by the Trust on the island. Dishearteningly, it's all too apparent that even this remote and wild coastline has not been left untouched by the scourge of marine plastic.

The most common plastic polluter along these beaches is waste from the fishing industry. The problem includes countless tiny strands of

polyethylene net intertwined with seaweed, all the way up to immovable trawler nets that blanket hidden coves. This lost or abandoned fishing gear is often referred to as ghost gear.

Ghost gear is not only a problem along the coastline of Skye: it represents a colossal international issue. A recent Greenpeace report on ghost gear concluded that the fishing industry is the largest individual contributor of ocean plastic. Each year 640,000 tonnes

of fishing waste enter our oceans, which is equivalent in weight to 50,000 double-decker buses.

This casts no blame on local fisherman; ghost gear is mainly a problem caused by illegal, unregulated or unreported fishing. It does, however, have an impact on local fishing communities, with fish stocks suffering from entanglement and bioaccumulation of breakdown chemicals from plastic products. Recognising its responsibilities, the fishing industry is a significant contributor to the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, an international organisation focused on reducing the amount of fishing net that ends up in our oceans.

Although the issue is huge, change is happening. In March 2023, United Nations member states signed the High Seas Treaty, with one of its aims being to restrict the areas of deep ocean in which fishing can take place.

Organisations such as the Global Ghost Gear Initiative are educating fishing communities worldwide, pressing for change by net manufacturers and campaigning for regulatory change.

Meanwhile, the John Muir Trust team on Skye is also doing its bit to help combat the problem by working alongside local volunteer groups and organisations to support beach cleans along the coastline. One such community group, Skye Beach Cleans, has already cleared 12.5 tonnes of litter from Skye's beaches in 2023.

The Trust ranger team can also be found regularly combing the coast for plastic waste, although we are also doing other work to raise awareness of how this international issue is impacting the local landscape. We have invited a range of youth groups to participate in Trust-led beach cleans, while we are also supporting a research team from Loughborough University as they assess the distribution and source of plastic waste around the Isle of Skye. □



PHOTOGRAPH: FRAN LOCKHART

**Cleaning up: just some of the marine litter gathered at Skye's Camasunary beach down the years; Ben Smith (left) with the Trust's Skye Manager, John MacRae (below)**



PHOTOGRAPH: RORY SYME



PHOTOGRAPH: BEN SMITH



PHOTOGRAPH: BEN SMITH



**About the author**  
 Ben Smith was the Trust's Seasonal Ranger on Skye in summer 2023 and has since returned to studying Environmental Politics.

*His role was supported by NatureScot through the Better Places Green Recovery Fund.*

# Proxy walks

**Paths for All** artist-in-residence **Alec Finlay** explores how walking for others can be a lifeline for those living with chronic health conditions

FOR me, one of the wonderful things about Paths for All is that it engages with the full spectrum of walking abilities including, if it doesn't seem paradoxical, the idea of 'not walking'. Recently I've been writing about experiencing the loss of one's ability to walk through chronic illness.

Today, we're living through what might be best summed up as a mass disabling event. Whatever we think about the pandemic, a consequence is that 2.3 million people in the UK now have Long Covid. For many, one of the most distressing symptoms is the loss of walking and the ways in which this changes their world.

When I speak of not walking, what I have in mind is the loss of an ability to do the things people consider normal, like walking to the shops or the bus stop or accompanying their kids to school.

For many, their main symptom is the energy 'crash', which is an extreme reaction that follows exercise. Being unable to walk does not switch off the *desire* to walk and new limits have to be learnt by repeated trial and error.

Having had limited walking for 30 years because of ME, I've been considering how we can make minor walks interesting and without exhausting ourselves. This has led to a new project called 'proxy walks'. The idea is that someone walks in a place for someone else, bringing back a description of it. It's a simple but powerful idea, because it returns the sense of belonging in the world, or on a hill.

During the pandemic, people became used to the idea of using an ability to walk to benefit others,



PHOTOGRAPH: DUNCAN ANDISON/DOBE STOCK



PHOTOGRAPH: BILL BRECKENRIDGE

fetching or delivering things, making a social call. In the proxy walk, we instead carry impressions and memories.

One way we connect to each other is through our individual experiences of nature. A proxy walk invites us to pause and attach words and images to the richness of sensory experiences when outside.

For my own proxy walk, I chose tiny St Fillan's Hill in Perthshire because it's a walk I could once do – though with some pain afterwards. The hour I spent on the summit more than a dozen years ago was crucial to my realisation that viewing offered an alternative to walking.

I'd had this proxy walk on my 'to do' list for months when a friend, Tamara, offered to go on a walk for me wherever I wished. That synchronicity – she'd no idea I was developing the concept – was a blessing.

She knew the region from her work but had never been up this wee hill

**“A proxy walk invites us to pause and attach words and images to the richness of sensory experiences when outside”**

– a pre-requisite for a proxy walk is that the walker has no previous knowledge of a place, so their impressions are fresh.

Ahead of this first walk, I wrote a 'manifesto' for others to adopt or adapt as they see fit. It starts with this: on the same day, for one hour, the recipient (or non-walker) remembers a walk in the place they have nominated and the walker then describes that place by making notes as they walk through it. The result is a proxy walk. Do try it for someone. □

### **Further information**

*Alec Finlay's work on proxy walks is part of a wider project around access to wild places for those living with chronic fatigue, pain and other constraints. [dayofaccess.co.uk](http://dayofaccess.co.uk)*

*Proxy walks are currently being piloted by Awards+, a John Muir Award provider formerly known as Friends of the Award. For more, visit [fota.org.uk/news/2564](http://fota.org.uk/news/2564)*



To date, access to the open countryside in England and Wales remains limited

# Access all areas

With renewed impetus for a greater ‘right to roam’, **Catherine Flitcroft** from the British Mountaineering Council explores the complex issue of access rights in England and Wales

IT IS clear that while Covid awakened people’s appetite for outdoor exploration, it also highlighted how the outdoors is far from accessible to everyone. There remain a multitude of barriers, with underrepresented communities the most affected. Today, around 2.69 million people live more than a 10-minute walk away from any green or blue space.

Access in England and Wales has often been kicked into the long grass, from broken promises on farming schemes providing funding for improved public access to the slashing of local authority budgets for maintaining the rights of way network. This, despite the rise of ‘social prescribing’ as an aid to health and wellbeing.

For organisations like the British Mountaineering Council (BMC), now is the time to consider whether the only way of improving matters is to change the system at a fundamental level.

It is more than two decades since the beginning of public rights to access open countryside in England and Wales. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gave a right of access on foot to mountain, moor, heath and down, while the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 provided a long-distance route around the coast of England (plus a margin of access land along the length of the English coastline).

Both were landmark pieces of



legislation but have not been without their problems – not least as they remain poorly understood by the wider public. Most significantly they allow access to just 8 per cent of England and 20 per cent of Wales – areas that can often only be reached by car and only allow for walking, running and climbing. To date, there are no rights of access for activities such as off-road cycling, canoeing or wild camping.

The BMC recently conducted a survey in which 90 per cent of respondents supported a ‘right to roam’ similar to the 2003 Scottish Land Reform Act (SLRA) which included statutory public rights of access for recreational and other purposes. This provides a strong mandate to lobby for changes to or the introduction of new legislation.

But there are key challenges ahead. There will likely be strong opposition from landowning bodies and we must listen to and understand their legitimate concerns. A balance must also be found between increasing access to nature and minimising

environmental impacts. People care for what they love, but they only love what they know. That connection is crucial if we are to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises.

There are many lessons to be learnt too from the Scottish Outdoor Access Code which followed the roll-out of the SLRA. Such a code, which enables visitors and land managers to feel more secure in their rights, helps guide informed decisions on exploring the outdoors in a safe and responsible way.

Extending access rights and delivering on nature recovery will require government commitment and clear targets for both. The exact costs involved in extending a right to roam are still to be understood but it will cost far less than the potential savings that the NHS could make each year – an estimated £2.1 billion. As well as promoting a healthy nation, outdoor recreation also drives the visitor economy and creates jobs worth over £25 billion.

Now is the time to be bold. The BMC believes that a right to roam represents the future of access in England and Wales. We must move to a more inclusive approach similar to the Scottish model and will be working with other like-minded organisations to lobby for just that. □

## About the author

Dr Catherine Flitcroft is Policy and Campaigns Manager at the BMC. [thebmc.co.uk](http://thebmc.co.uk)

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# 500,000 and counting

**Toby Clark highlights the significance of reaching 500,000 John Muir Awards – and plans underway for the next half a million**

**MILESTONES** are important. They are moments to celebrate and provide us with time to reflect on accomplishments; to say thank you; and to review goals and objectives alongside forward planning.

We've been doing plenty of all those things since July when the Trust approved and sent out its 500,000th John Muir Award certificate. It's worth saying again: half a million Awards. Now that really is a milestone.

The Trust launched its John Muir Award as a national environmental scheme in 1997. Its simple structure – encouraging people to Discover wild places that are relevant to them; Explore them in ways that are meaningful; take personal responsibility to Conserve them; and Share experiences with others – aims to promote the care of wild places for educational, social and personal development.

Each recipient has committed a minimum of four days of activity enjoying, connecting with and caring for wild places.

The John Muir Award was originally designed as an outreach tool, building active environmental approaches within partner organisations such as schools, youth groups, clubs, health services and local authorities. At its heart was a desire to ensure that people's circumstances did not exclude them from opportunities to experience wild places. In doing so, the John Muir Award enables the Trust to meet people where they are at.

Importantly, it also reaches across the UK, from Anglesey to Aberdeen and Belfast to Brighton (see map). Today, nearly 2,000 'Provider' organisations work with the Trust to deliver nearly 30,000 John Muir Awards each year. Often, the work of these organisations extends far beyond the environmental 'usual suspects' to encompass issues such as homelessness, recovery and rehabilitation, families at risk and youth intervention. Every year at least a quarter of all John Muir Awards are achieved by people experiencing some form of disadvantage.

## WORKING TOGETHER

So, how have we reached half a million? We've kept it simple. Drawing inspiration from Patrick Geddes, another Scottish-born polymath, the Trust has adopted a model that encourages people to care, understand and do. This kind of 'Heart, Head, Hand' model resonates across the spectrum of educationalists and practitioners.

We've embraced societal priorities by using the John Muir Award to position wild places with curriculum, youth work/social action, employability, attainment,

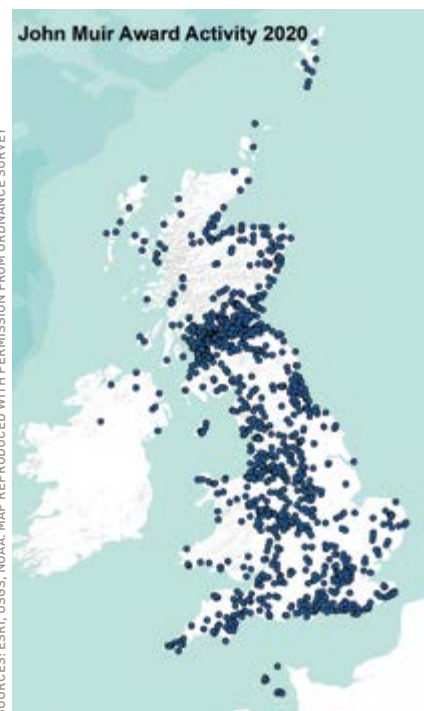


sustainability, adventure and health and wellbeing agendas. Demonstrating importance and relevance across national priorities helps teachers, youth workers and other practitioners justify their time and commitment to deliver the Award on behalf of the Trust.

We've made full use of networks. The Trust has contributed towards established networks such as the Awards Network (youth awards in Scotland), Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, UK National Parks, Institute for Outdoor Learning and the #iWill youth movement. All help amplify wild place messages.

We've forged funding and capacity partnerships with a range of organisations: the Cairngorms, Lake District, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Parks; local authorities such as East Lothian, Telford & Wrekin and East Ayrshire; Youth Hostel Association; The Outward Bound Trust; and Scottish Forestry to name a few. We've learnt and grown from funded projects such as Keeping it Wild (London), and Urdd Gobaith Cymru – Wales' largest national youth organisation.





We've shared people's wild place stories. By showcasing and celebrating creative case studies, films, resources and reports we've inspired people from all walks of life to get involved. The John Muir Award is collaborative – delivered through Award Providers and partners – and so are the stories of wild places.

And we've measured impact. In 2019, the annual Conserve activity of John Muir Award participants enhancing wild places was valued at more than £1.5 million, with each participant spending on average seven hours-worth of activity through action and campaigns.

Research by Glasgow University, *The Health Impacts of the John Muir Award*, found that young people living in the most deprived 15 per cent of Scotland were six times less likely than their peers to have experienced wild places before their John Muir Award involvement.

This milestone isn't simply the Trust's, it's a collective. It couldn't have been achieved without the organisations, grants and individuals who have helped fund activity – from NatureScot and Natural Resource Wales, to Members, corporate sponsors, volunteer envelope stuffers, marathon runners and cake bakers.

Neither would this have been possible without John Muir Award Providers, leaders and partners. Whether in Welsh, Gaelic or English they've been guided by Muir's words to "do something for wildness and make the mountains glad".

## NEXT STEPS

The Trust now plans to strengthen and expand the John Muir Award's reach across the UK. Enjoyment and nature connectedness builds awareness and understanding of the many and varied benefits wild places can bring. To

## “The John Muir Award reaches across the UK, from Anglesey to Aberdeen and Belfast to Brighton”

achieve this, we are redesigning the John Muir Award so that it remains a vital component of our engagement work.

To assist our knowledge, we've benefited from the work of Place Innovation, an equitable access

outdoor and community consultancy. They've helped shape principles of how outdoor-based learning fosters genuine and lasting connectedness to wild places that then leads to advocacy and action.

We're also calling on our Members and supporters to contribute towards redesigning the John Muir Award. We are particularly interested in hearing from those who can:

- help with co-creating and piloting a redesigned Award in their workplace
- share insights and experience on measuring impacts
- signpost or offer funding support to help us test, trial and develop a redesigned Award

Together, we can ensure a bright future for the John Muir Award in a rapidly changing world. Now, more than ever, we need to inspire people to care for wild places across the UK and showcase how they are essential to people's lives, help tackle the climate crisis and reverse biodiversity loss. □

### Further information

To help shape the future John Muir Award, visit our [John Muir Award pages](#) and a special [Award Redesign 'contact us' section](#). [johnmuirtrust.org](http://johnmuirtrust.org)

### About the author

Toby Clark is the Trust's John Muir Award Scotland Manager



# Crossing continents

**Divya Singh Raghuvanshi, a recent intern with the Trust, reveals her early inspiration for nature conservation – and the difference in approach between her homeland in India and the UK**

**THE** year is 2004. It is only a week before New Year's Eve and winter mist amid dark, lingering night sneaks up on me through the window as I stay awake, wanting to reach the end of Emily Dickinson's *A Bird, came down the Walk*.

The next morning is a vivid memory. The live news telecast has Ma and Da's undivided attention. Boxing Day tsunami. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand – an unprecedented loss of life and devastation surrounding the coast of the Indian Ocean. How to make sense of what just transpired? Visible confusion, fear and remorse in my parents' eyes. I hold onto them both more firmly than usual.

Later in the week, we hike to a nearby hilltop temple surrounded by lush green wilderness, the air full of bird song. While there, we are joined by playful, hungry langurs.

I look back on these contrasting moments as the genesis of my inspiration for conservation: an interest that began with a nature poem, a natural disaster and countless questions behind my nine-year-old eyes.

Ever since, eco-literature has served as a segue for me to grasp the 'nature' of vast savannas, tropical rainforests and high mountains. Through my reading, it became increasingly clear to me that wild places are not just picturesque scenes to admire; they are wellsprings of life, holding secrets that we are only beginning to understand.

Enthralled by wild places, I embarked on a journey that forever changed my perspective on conservation. From the lush jungles of India to the living landscapes of the UK, each step has revealed a symphony of efforts to protect our precious natural heritage.



A tiger in India's Pench National Park (main); a young Divya with her parents at Pachmarhi Hill Station, Madhya Pradesh (inset)

As I grew from child to adult, I ventured ever further into the heart of India. The vibrant colours of Pench National Park, Kanha Tiger Reserve and Van Vihar National Park – just three of the more than a hundred IUCN category II protected National Parks in India – danced before my eyes, while the regal presence of *Panthera tigris*, our national animal, left me in awe.

In India, community engagement is the cornerstone of conservation. Tribal villages that have coexisted with the wild for centuries play an integral role in safeguarding their ancestral homelands. As I sat with villagers in my home state of Madhya Pradesh, I listened to their real-time tales of reverence for nature and understood that resolving human-wildlife conflict was inextricably linked to the wellbeing of their community.

The passion of conservationists here originates from an intergenerational vision to protect India's wild places. Their dedication, I believe, is fuelled by an understanding that every creature, no matter how small, plays an indispensable role in the harmony of life.

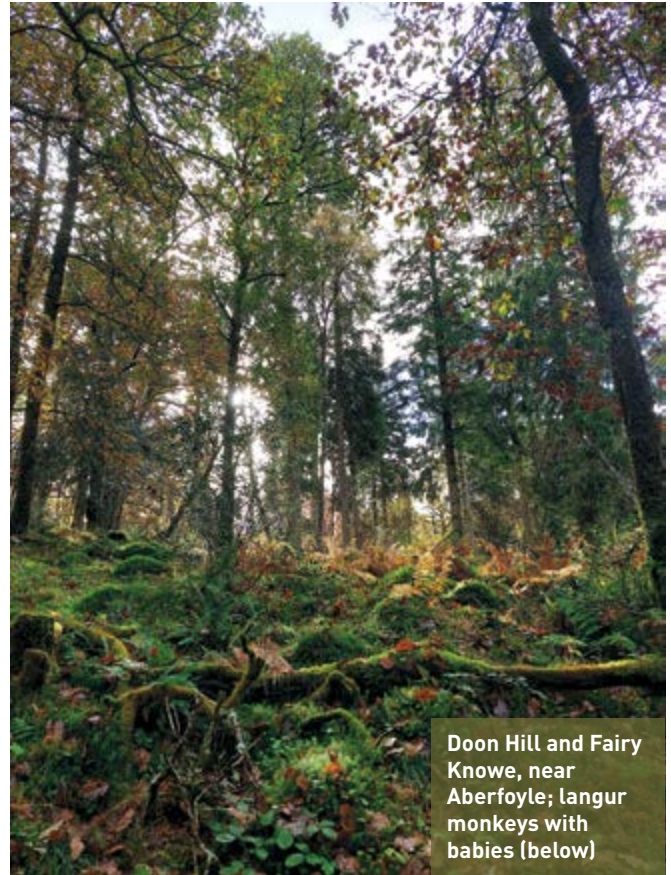
## THEN AND NOW

When I moved to the UK last year to pursue a postgraduate degree in environmental communication, there echoed a different but equally vigorous dedication to conservation.

Conservation efforts here demonstrate the potential for urban spaces to coexist with nature. As I journeyed through urban wildlife sanctuaries, I marvelled at how bustling cities can become havens for biodiversity. Rooftop gardens, alive with butterflies and birds,



PHOTOGRAPH: REVATI/ ADOBE STOCK



Doon Hill and Fairy Knowe, near Aberfoyle; langur monkeys with babies (below)



**“Tribal villages that have coexisted with the wild for centuries play an integral role in safeguarding their ancestral homelands”**

showcased the power of human ingenuity and compassion.

In this land of history and heritage, I also witnessed the restoration of once-dying ecosystems: the winds whispered tales of revival as I explored protected and restored landscapes in parts of Scotland – the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park, the magnificent Cairngorms and the poetic Isle of Skye – that are now full of vitality.

For my studies, I read (and re-read) Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* while exploring the Scottish Highlands and islands to discover the meaning of place, dwelling and belonging.

In the UK, conservation embraces the duality of preserving the past while forging ahead with innovative strategies. Ancient wildlands here stand as living time capsules, while modern initiatives breathe new life into forgotten landscapes. Conservation of wild places

transcends borders and cultures. A shared responsibility that connects us all.

For John Muir, conservation was not just a nostalgic preservation but an intervention in our potential futures. As a student of environmental communication, I have had the privilege to learn about the urgency that surrounds eco-centricity in a distinctly anthropocentric world. Approaching my short but impactful stint at the Trust through an academic lens revealed the true significance of collective action in helping to repair the tears in the natural fabric of our planet.

The meaning of wild places is not absolute in that it is something that evolves depending on how individuals and communities experience them. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: wild places are for all – a point well realised in the Trust’s purpose of conserving, protecting and restoring wild places for the benefit of everyone.

On my next wild day out, I will revisit Dickinson’s bird on my walk, slow down, converse with the woods and reflect on the value of co-existence. Indeed, in the words of John Muir, “The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness”. □

#### ***About the author***

*Divya Singh Raghuvanshi is a postgraduate student at the University of Glasgow pursuing a Master of Letters in Environment, Culture and Communication. In a student volunteer capacity at the Trust, Divya explored building communication around issues such as implementation of a potential carbon emissions land tax and the impact of onshore windfarms on nature conservation.*

# Common cause

## **Kevin Lelland details the rationale behind the Trust's decision not to tender for the long-term lease of Glenridding Common and what it means for future work in the Lake District**

**SHORTLY** after the Trust signed an initial three-year lease with the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) to manage land at Glenridding Common I was asked a question: "Is the Trust in for the long haul?" My response at the time (that was subsequently published in the October 2018 edition of *TGO Magazine*) was, "To make a difference in three years is difficult, but we can start the ball rolling, and build on things that are already working well. What form our tenure might take is up for debate, but we are listening".

Almost exactly five years from the publication of those words, including three further one-year extensions to the lease, the conversation on the Trust's long-term involvement at Glenridding Common has reached what appears to be an end, with Trustees agreeing not to tender for a 99-year lease proposed by LDNPA.

On the face of it, this is a striking decision for an organisation known for managing iconic landscapes – which Helvellyn and the adjoining Swirral Edge and Striding Edge undoubtedly are – and for a charity with an ambition to further develop its reach into England and Wales.

But the decision is aligned to a clarity of purpose and a conviction to work in locations where the Trust

can best deliver exemplary land management and inspire engagement for the benefit of nature, people and communities.

The Trust respects cultural as well as natural heritage and recognises that with wild places being so diverse we cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach across the UK. In turn, by acting to repair wild places, we do so to bring a case for their protection to the top table at Westminster, the Senedd and Holyrood. If we cannot demonstrate sustainable stewardship of land, at a pace that addresses current global environmental crises, we cannot hope to protect wild places for the benefit of present and future generations.

This requires us to critically examine where to invest our time and resources, and that increasingly means working where there is an appetite for and the mechanisms in place to drive positive environmental change.

Having operated the lease of the 1,100ha of Glenridding Common (which includes an area jointly owned by LDNPA and the National Trust) since 2017, we have had six years in which to form relationships and to assess the Trust's ability to deliver our charitable objectives on the site now and in the future.

During this stewardship, the team

has made many improvements at Glenridding Common and delivered fantastic work with local people and organisations. This has included working with the local community to grow on Arctic-alpine plants and plant them out in areas where they are safe from grazing mouths, repairing footpaths and removing vast quantities of litter from the slopes of Helvellyn.

We were able to demonstrate an ability to raise money for the work and, thanks to the generosity of our Members and several key funders, went on to stretch the use of that money across a six-year period. The take-up of any new lease will require further fundraising, and raising money will require the ability to present a clear plan for further ecological improvements.

However, while the terms of the proposed lease asked the lease holder to manage the land towards 'favourable condition' the lease did not give the Trust the level of control required to take the logical next steps to manage the land for ecological recovery for the benefit of all.

The proposed terms of the new lease were also not a like-for-like continuation of the current arrangement, with the land holding to be managed differently from what has been managed to date. This was due to the removal of one of the most promising areas for nature recovery – with the area proposed under the new lease agreement reduced in size



Helvellyn sunrise:  
Swirral and Striding  
Edges, with Red Tarn  
nestled in between

PHOTOGRAPH: ADDBESTOCK

from 1,100ha to 826ha.

Following advice from the local staff team, the Trustees arrived at a view that the proposed terms of the new lease and current related legislation do not allow scope for the further repair of this special wild place, to lock in carbon and increase biodiversity.

While the Trust will not shut the door on the potential to work again at Glenridding Common, it is clear that there would need to be a new common ground found somewhere between current proposals for long-term tenure and its own charitable objectives. We made a substantial difference in six years, we started the ball rolling and we will continue to listen.

### THIRLMERE FOCUS

While our lease at Glenridding Common is set to end, the work there has played a pivotal part in establishing our role in an important project nearby. After signing up to a partnership with United Utilities and Cumbria Wildlife Trust in 2020, our work on the other side of the Helvellyn massif at Thirlmere has gone from strength to strength.

It is a partnership that has clear aims to manage the land to sequester carbon, increase biodiversity, produce cleaner water and champion nature-friendly farming with the local community at the heart of the project. As a result, from July 2023, the Trust is delighted to

have appointed Isaac Johnston, our former Glenridding Common Ranger, into a role as Thirlmere Resilience Project Officer.

Isaac tells me: “It’s an ambitious and exciting project to deliver nature recovery with the local community and the shepherd at West Head Farm. I’m also personally pleased to still be working on Helvellyn, albeit on the other side of the hill, to bring environmental benefits to its western flanks.”

Last winter, the Trust delivered two tree planting programmes in the Wythburn Valley during which we engaged more than 250 people and planted over 3,000 native trees. With a dedicated staff member in place, the two Trusts will achieve many of the partnership’s objectives. These include plans for a tree nursery to be run with the help of local volunteers, more large-scale tree planting on the hillside, increased engagement through events and volunteering opportunities and a programme of habitat and species monitoring to track improvements across the site.

We couldn’t be more pleased to be working alongside our partners in this project and look forward to making an environmental difference in what is a particularly prominent part of this wonderful National Park. □

#### *About the author*

*Kevin Lelland is the Trust’s Director of Development and Communication*



PHOTOGRAPH: BENJAMIN STATHAM

### Our impact

Our lease at Glenridding Common will expire in October, but we can look back with considerable pride at what was achieved, including:

- Completed 71 habitat and species surveys (from breeding birds to bryophytes, Arctic-alpine plants and Moorland Indicators of Climate Change Initiatives surveys)
- Invested over £80,000 in upland path maintenance and created local employment for two skilled path workers
- Worked with Fix the Fells on 10 joint volunteer work parties to deliver path maintenance
- In 2022, we removed 164kg of litter, including 562 banana skins and 1,801 piles of tissues and wet wipes from Helvellyn
- Planted more than 1,000 native broadleaf trees in 21ha of fenced enclosures
- Planted over 1,500 downy willow at high altitude
- Taken cuttings from six rare montane willow species and various native flowers that are grown on throughout the year (pictured)
- Worked alongside local volunteer growers and Natural England to produce approximately 200 Arctic-alpine plants annually to be planted out onto high altitude ledges
- Led more than 20 educational visits for Cumbria University, Patterdale Primary School, Lake District National Park Young Rangers, The Lakes School, Outward Bound Trust, Cumbria Wildlife Trust Apprentice Conservation Officers, Outdoor Providers and members of the public



PHOTOGRAPH: KATRINA MARTIN

# Creative thinking

**Romany Garnett** highlights a research project that uses the arts to explore how residents of the Northwest Highlands feel about effective climate action

**MOST** people are now familiar with the thinking around net zero carbon emissions, a just transition and carbon neutral practices. But scientists tell us that climate targets are being missed and global temperatures continue to rise. As a result, and although we know more about climate change than ever before, many people experience a sense of inertia brought on by despair, panic or simply hopelessness that can reduce our ability to respond effectively.

It is such feelings that Dr Mandy Haggith, an author, poet and lecturer in creative writing and literature at University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Inverness, is now exploring through *Peat, Diesel and Seaweed*, a research project that uses the arts to shed new light on tackling climate change.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project is a partnership between UHI and Northwest 2045, itself a network of local landowners and community groups working to design a 'green transition' in coastal communities throughout the Northwest Highlands.

"This project is a creative study, using arts methods including poetry

to help people express how they feel about climate change," explains Mandy who lives in Assynt. "I want to encourage folk to express their concerns but also to dream about a better future."

The project begins with an initial online survey that addresses the broad issue of climate change, before exploring three topics: peatland restoration, marine diesel alternatives and seaweed cultivation.



PHOTOGRAPH: BILLY ARTHUR/WIRESTOCK

Above: Mandy (far left) with participants on a creative writing walk. This picture: seaweed cultivation could become important for coastal communities

While all three have a potentially significant role to play, especially in coastal communities within the study area, they each currently receive far less attention than issues such as road and air transport, energy generation, housing and food production.

A keen sailor herself, Mandy is researching alternatives to marine diesel, with the individual chemical compounds found in diesel fuel reflected in her resulting poetry. Similarly, her writing will also explore the significant potential of seaweed to store carbon and create job opportunities.

"Seaweed can be discussed in terms of being a high-value edible product to a potential carbon sequestration solution, with huge scope for creating job opportunities around its cultivation," notes Mandy.

Throughout the study, there is a particular focus on reaching young people to tease out what they feel is most important in delivering a just transition to zero emissions. "Young people are inheriting the environmental mess we've made," says Mandy. "They are not responsible for the state of the planet but we are looking to them to fix it. It is inherently unfair."

Overall, the ambition is that by taking a more creative approach to a conversation so often immersed in science speak and politics, the key issues around climate change can be made more human and relatable – with the project findings feeding directly into how coastal communities in this part of Scotland navigate their way forward. □

## About the author

*Romany Garnett is the Trust's Engagement Manager (North Region).*

*Romany represents the Trust on the Peat, Diesel and Seaweed steering group. [northwest2045.scot](http://northwest2045.scot)*



  
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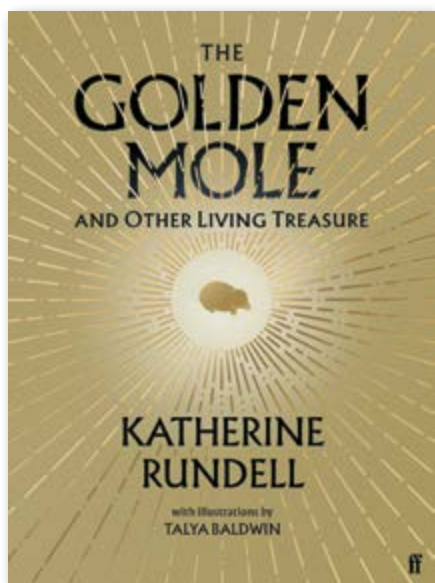
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### *The Golden Mole and Other Living Treasure*, by Katherine Rundell

Reading this book, **Toby Clark** is reminded that the world is indeed “more astonishing, more miraculous and more wonderful than our wildest imaginings”

IN HER latest work, scholar and award-winning children’s author Katherine Rundell invites readers to look anew at some of the wild creatures we share our planet with. Organised into 22 creature chapters, she marvels at the unique wonders of each animal through anecdotes, love letters and vivid mistakes.

Sadly, however, every species is either endangered or contains a sub-species that is endangered; each accompanied by a shadow of urgency.

Golden threads run throughout. The book’s cover is gold embossed, every page is gold-edged, while each chapter features illustrations of creatures by Talya Baldwin that include detail in gold leaf.

But it is the words that compel the senses even more, with the pages full of Rundell’s trademark vivid writing and love of the strange or inspiring. We learn about the golden mole itself, a sub-Saharan species that is so named as it is the only mammal to possess an iridescent coat – a colour-play that results from its

flattened, scale-covered hairs, which reflect light in shifting patterns.

We also learn that polar bears have a smell so sensitive as to be able to detect us from 30kms away; that giraffes have been photographed at night “with clusters of sleeping birds tucked into their armpits, keeping them dry” and that, to wash themselves, swifts “hunt down clouds and fly through gentle rain, slowly, wings outstretched.”

The human world is also very much part of the book’s life tapestry. In the final chapter, the author highlights how our “active, informed, sustained attention is perhaps one of the rarest and most powerful” astonishments in the world. It’s that attention, our wonder of and love for the planet’s finest that calls for “more furious, more iron-willed treasuring.”

*The Golden Mole* can be enjoyed at bedtime, on a commute or beneath a tree. Like the world we live in there is something within the book to spark wonder and curiosity across all ages and interests. It treasures the living and would make a treasured gift.

Half of the royalties from this book go to charities pushing back climate change and environmental destruction.

£14.99

[faber.co.uk](http://faber.co.uk)

#### *About the reviewer*

*Toby Clark is the Trust’s John Muir Award Scotland Manager*

### Others we like

#### *Way Makers*, Kerri Andrews

The follow up to her best-selling *Wanderers*, this first anthology of women’s writing about walking sees Kerri Andrews celebrate the literary heritage of women walker-writers, from the eighteenth century to the present day. For the women in this anthology, walking is a complex activity: a source of creativity and comfort; a means



of expressing grief, longing and desire; and representative of freedom, but also tinged with danger. £15.99. [reaktionbooks.co.uk](http://reaktionbooks.co.uk)

#### *The Flow*, Amy-Jane Beer

In this beautiful book, the author returns to a Cumbrian river where she lost a dear friend and reconnects with the natural world. The resulting exploration of water as it



## *Hindsight – In Search of Lost Wilderness*, by Jenna Watt

**Mike Daniels** enjoys a refreshingly different look at the complex subject of deer management

OVER many decades, much has been said and written about deer management in Scotland – nearly all of it by white, middle-aged men (like me). In this book, acclaimed theatre writer, actor and director Jenna Watt embarks on a personal journey into deer management and ecological restoration from a fresh perspective.

Drawing on her Highland upbringing, gamekeeping ancestry and artistic background, she investigates the role of gender, class and animal welfare concern in deer and land management past, present and future. This includes the ingrained patriarchal and feudalistic attitudes around land management and towards rural workers that still persist, believing them to be potentially perpetuated by the new ‘green lairds’ who have been buying up vast tracts of land for rewilding or farming carbon.

Jenna challenges the paradigm that landowners should have the absolute right to choose how that land is managed, instead suggesting that the starting point should be: “what does this land need?”

Her answer to that question is clear. Over many generations, the state of much of Scotland’s land is depressing enough to cause “ecological grief”. She makes a strong case that we should

stop blaming deer for this state of affairs and start facing up to our own responsibilities. After all, it is people who have turned deer into Scotland’s emblematic national species, a Highland meme and a global export.

It is us who have built much of Scotland’s rural economy around deer and imbued them with a capital value (each stag shot can add between £25,000 and £50,000 to the value of a sporting estate). And it is we who have bred them out of the woods and onto the open hill, where they are smaller and less nourished than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe.

As such, it is not deer but human engineering of the natural environment that has inflicted extensive ecological damage across much of rural Scotland.

*Hindsight* does not pretend to be a detached scientific analysis. The research has been conducted not in libraries or digital archives, but in conversations with real people on the ground, with all their diverse opinions and different interactions with the land and nature.

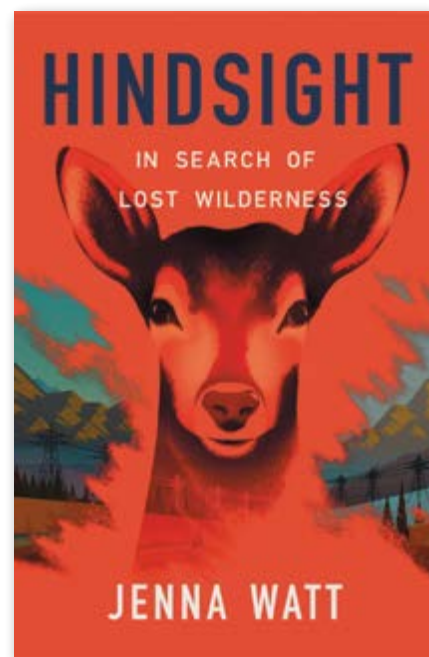
Those with no experience of the subject may well find *Hindsight* an illuminating introduction to the complexities and conflicts surrounding an industry, steeped in archaic tradition, that continues to hold sway across much of rural Scotland.

£14.99

[birlinn.co.uk](http://birlinn.co.uk)

### *About the reviewer*

Mike Daniels is the Trust’s Director of Policy



meanders through many lives and landscapes reflects how we can all have a deeply personal place in nature. £10.99. [bloomsbury.com/uk](http://bloomsbury.com/uk)

### *Rewilding the Sea*, Charles Clover

In this follow up to his acclaimed *The End of the Line: How Overfishing is Changing the World*, Charles Clover explores how determined



individuals are proving that the crisis in our oceans can be reversed – with benefits for local communities and whole ecosystems alike. Evidencing the benefits of changing how we fish, or where we fish at all, he reveals how we can store more carbon and have more fish simply by stepping aside and putting greater trust in nature itself. £12.99 [penguin.co.uk](http://penguin.co.uk)

# Kate Rawles

Having spent a year cycling, on a bamboo bike, the length of South America to explore the continent's biodiversity, Kate Rawles is now touring the UK with *The Life Cycle* – a new book that charts her incredible journey. **Graham Watson** learns more

## Explain how this latest journey actually started many years ago

My youthful dreams involved a romanticised notion of 'adventure' – both alluring and seemingly out of reach for an unathletic, weedy and, oh yes, female, child. It was the bicycle that made adventure possible for me. Over the years I fell in love with cycling in mountains especially. At the same time, I was finding out about major environmental issues and learning that climate change negatively impacts mountain ecosystems sooner and with more severity than anywhere else and it broke my heart.

## What prompted this particular adventure?

*The Life Cycle* was prompted in part by a diagram that shocked me: it summarised a piece of scientific research which argued that biodiversity loss was even more dangerous than climate change. Could that be true? This ride was an attempt to answer that question.

## Tell me about the bike you rode on the trip

The bike – Woody – has become a star character in the story. I built Woody myself on a course run by the Bamboo Bicycle Club in London, using bamboo that came from the Eden Project in Cornwall. I loved the idea of doing a biodiversity ride on a bike with a frame that used to be a plant!



PHOTOGRAPHY: KATE RAWLES

Kate in Colombia; Woody the bamboo bike (inset)

## Where did the route take you?

The route included a range of ecosystems, from the Caribbean coastline through lush lowlands into high paramo grassland; from cloud and rainforests to the Atacama Desert, the Bolivian salt flats and the spiky mountains of the Peruvian Andes.

## What were the key aspects of this journey?

There were many but the most important has to be the biodiversity story. We are losing species and habitats at such a rate it's been called the sixth great extinction, caused for the first time in earth's history by a single resident species. Us. Biodiversity is not a luxury. It's vital to all life on earth. Trying to raise awareness of this, and to inspire all of us to take action, was *The Life Cycle's* overall aim.

## Between the journey itself, the book and working to inspire action, what has been the greatest satisfaction?

When people say that the book has helped strengthen their understanding not just about the importance of biodiversity and of taking action, but of the interconnectedness of all our major environmental challenges and the fact that we can't tweak our way out of them.

## Why use your journey to complete a John Muir Award?

Doing it as a John Muir Award was an excellent way to help amplify the aims of the trip. It would be wonderful if my journey encouraged others to take their own action on behalf of wild places and biodiversity.

## Finally, tell me about your book tour

The UK Life Cycle Tour is already under way. I'm cycling from event to event, towing books in a trailer. Along the way, I'm visiting places where biodiversity is either celebrated or threatened (or both). Closing what's been called the 'inspiration/action gap' is a real challenge. The aim is to engage very deliberately with the question of what particular audiences can do for biodiversity in their location.

## Further information

*A writer and former university lecturer in environmental philosophy, Kate Rawles has long used adventurous journeys to raise awareness about environmental challenges. [outdoorphilosophy.co.uk](http://outdoorphilosophy.co.uk)*

## About the interviewer

*Graham Watson is the Trust's John Muir Award Manager, Cumbria.*

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