

## Myth and Reality: A Story of Our Time

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Recently I came across the following quote by Carl Sagan in his book *The Demon-Haunted World* where he discusses the difference between science and pseudoscience; it is a quote I had not heard before:

One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It's simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we've been taken.

If bamboozles capture us, this quote captured my imagination! This is because it made me realise that this is exactly what has happened in the Scottish Highlands to the rewilding lobby and, indeed, to the conservation movement generally: they have been captured. The bamboozle in question is not thickets of bamboos but forests of trees: the concept of a once great forest across the Highlands which we humans have destroyed, to wit 'The Great Forest of Caledon'. If we believe this, we need to state how we destroyed it over the centuries and we conclude that the mechanisms involved are tree felling, muirburn, sheep grazing and deer grazing. And, of course, there has to be a scapegoat, viz. the landowners. This makes perfect sense and explains everything. The bamboozle is complete!

Except ... the evidence is lacking. But who, after all, is interested in finding out the truth when the story encapsulates so many of the issues pertinent to our time: human destruction of the planet, the need for ecological restoration, the need for community action, the vested interests of the landowning lobby, the disgust of the shooting animals for sport, and negative impacts on the climate.

Much better to remain on the side of the angels and restore the planet, all in keeping with the Spirit of the Age and superb for marketing: "Here we are doing something positive for Scotland, so give us your money and support" – which people appear to do so in droves. The whole of Scotland, the public, the politicians, the professionals, the sycophantic media all go with the flow, have all been captured by the bamboozle. The only people who raise doubts appear to be the vested interest of landowners and gamekeepers, and who is interested in what they have to say?

And these rewilders and conservationists do, they say, have science on their side: after all, deer and sheep eat young trees and, by preventing the woods regenerating, cause forests to disappear from the landscape. And undoubtedly tree felling and fires can cause woods to disappear. All logical and scientific, so what is wrong with it? Related to this, and scientific in the sense that we are emotional creatures, is our attachment to trees: we all love trees, and hate to see them disappear, perhaps atavistic from when we actually lived in them?! Indeed, the furore about the recent felling of a lone sycamore on Hadrian's Wall was front page news for many days. What better thing to do, therefore, than to go out and plant a tree! After all, 'doing your bit for conservation' generally means four things: plant a tree, dig a pond, feed the birds and plant flowers for butterflies. And tree planting can be done on a large scale in the Highlands because of the concentrated nature of landownership. Who can argue with all this?

But we are gullible. For example, a conservation organisation raised money a year or two back along the lines that it was needed to 'Save an ancient pinewood'. It was successful in buying it, but those familiar with the location would know that action in recent years has resulted in enough tree regeneration at the site to ensure that the wood will persist for another few hundred years: it was not in need of 'saving'. But who cares as long as the emotional message resonates with us? And who is going to question the good intent of a conservation charity: after all, the site would be in safe hands?

Someone who has been working in conservation for a long time, maybe for their whole career, will not want to delve too deeply into the underpinning rationale for their or their organisation's action; will "no longer be interested in finding out the truth", to quote Carl Sagan. This is because anything they dig up may be too threatening, indeed may undermine their whole career to date, their core beliefs if you like, and go against the policies of their organisation, or even the government. And who has the strength of will to do this? They do not want to risk coming up with something "too painful to acknowledge." Much safer to keep their head down and stick with the herd. All perfectly understandable.

But who, then, is left to scrutinise with dedication the action and rationale of the nature charities? Are they exempt from the scrutiny given to other organisations because they are seen to be helping the planet go in the right direction? Has the media also been captured by the bamboozle? I ask this because the landscape of the Highlands is being transformed from open moorland to woodland, much of it in the name of conservation, ecological restoration or rewilding, without any public debate. Do we really know if the people Scotland really want to see their traditional open landscape lost to trees? Would they still want this if they knew that such landscapes are globally rare, much rarer than woodland? That they would be losing something unique and distinctly Scottish?

The reality is that large tracts of open moorland, many of which have been treeless for thousands of years through perfectly natural causes, and which have never been ploughed, planted or designed, are being converted from wild, natural landscapes to artificial, designed landscapes. This is accepted without question as the right thing to do. The bamboozle is complete!