

James Fenton

The wagons are rolling: Bandwagon after bandwagon, destroying the Highland landscape

As Norman McNab says in his letter on page 5: "It is a depressing story of landscape despoliation driven by political ignorance." I would add that much of it is also driven by ecological ignorance!

No-one, conservationists, politicians or the public, appears to care for the Highland landscape: they seem more concerned with the fate of the Amazon rainforest far from home than what is happening at their own back door. Reforesters are too busy planting trees or killing deer to have time for understanding the land, the renewal energy industrialists are too busy doing good to worry about their impact on the land, the peatland restorers have little understanding of the peat on the land, the montane scrubbers think scrub was once present, so are busy

compartmentalising the land, river restorers are single-mindedly fragmenting the land, the heather moorland campaigners give little consideration to their unintended consequences on the land, the carbon-offsetters have not got a clue about the land, the telecoms lobby is pushing for phone masts everywhere across the land, commercial foresters are still ploughing up the land, and let their trees invade the land, biodiversity campaigners, without thinking what the word means, want more biodiversity on the land, the concept of 'habitat condition' is banded around freely without any full understanding of what it means at the landscape scale... No-one seems to consider the cumulative impact on the Highland landscape of all these disparate actions. It is all too depressing! Indeed, I



A modern Highland landscape in Argyll, showing the direction of travel of the land. The concrete bases of a new windfarm are visible diagonally left to right

feel sorry for the fast-retreating, naturally-open, traditional, untrammelled Highland landscape, once one of the most natural remaining in Europe but now being fragmented to death. But who really cares?

When a bandwagon appears on the horizon, people immediately know it is the next 'best thing' and are unable to stop themselves leaping on board: the wagon then immediately picks up speed, gains policy blessing and, importantly, new grant money – and so becomes unstoppable, for who is unwilling to follow the money? And then the next one appears on the horizon and the world moves on. Loss of landscape by *ad hoc* grant schemes. Who ever stops and considers the impact of their actions on what professionals call the 'special qualities' of the landscape?

It would not be so bad if the bandwagons were underlain by evidence. Perhaps, on a superficial level, they are, but ecology is complex and it is all too complicated to work it out. Much easier to have simple, one-word solutions, superficially addressing what the wagon is carrying.

Occasionally, when evidence becomes too strong, bandwagons run into the sand and their direction is reversed: grants were once available across the uplands for ditches to be dug, and now they are available to fill them in. Grants were available to root out lowland hedges, there are now grants to put them back. Grants were available to plant trees on deep peat, now there are grants to remove them. Surely these should be cautionary tales?

The reforesting bandwagons

The reforesting bandwagons, though, are probably the most unstoppable because everyone just knows that we humans destroyed the original forest across Scotland and that it needs to be brought back. People just know this! This is in spite of no evidence of widespread destruction of forest by people across the Highlands over the millennia, although there have been localised areas where it did happen. It has been known for over 50 years, from pollen evidence, that woodland naturally expands after an ice age and then just as naturally declines in this, the oligocratic phase; and the famous Scottish geologist, James Geikie, after studying tree remains at the bottom of peat bogs, concluded in 1866 that the forest cover declined naturally. However, the later musings of Frank Fraser Darling, who called the Highlands a 'devastated countryside', seem to have more resonance with people, probably because it is more in keeping with the spirit of the age, when we know humans are damaging to the environment. Concomitant with increasing tree cover is the reduction in deer numbers: indeed, conservationists who condemn the killing of many species, seem to take pride in reducing red deer to ridiculously low levels. This is in spite of recent ecological thinking suggesting that, across the world, there is nothing natural about low grazing levels.

But reforesters have no interest in understanding the long-term vegetation dynamics of the Highlands, which would mean taking the trouble to delve into the complex interplay over long time periods



of climate, soil development and grazing. This applies equally to the so-called montane scrub ‘restoration’ bandwagon – there is no evidence that such a habitat ever existed in the Highlands, although it is certainly true that there are a few pockets of relict arctic-alpine scrub in the hills.

Similarly, the current bandwagon, which has infected almost everyone, is the need for the creation of riparian woodland [see the previous article by David Jarman] to benefit the endangered Atlantic salmon, which is suffering mainly from effects out at sea. Most Highland riversides have had few trees along them for thousands of years, which makes one question how salmon were plentiful in the past. Certainly, riverside trees can cool the river locally during extreme hot weather events, but a lot of trees would be needed to make a significant difference. However, electro-fishing in the far north of Scotland shows that the best salmon-spawning grounds there are burns in unwooded open moorland, particularly if there is tussocky grass along the edge (which is rarely grazed). It is too simplistic to say that we need more riparian woodland, not to mention the miles of fences which go with these schemes. Such an approach is also destroying the thousands of years of ecological continuity of the whole landscape: should we really be transforming the whole landscape just for one species?

Commercial forestry, whatever its economic benefits, has been a disaster for the Highland landscape, associated with irreversible forestry ploughing and mounding, the need for miles and miles of deer fences, huge vehicle tracks and the recent problem of self-seeding Sitka spruce taking over everywhere, even at high altitudes.

The carbon-offsetting bandwagon has brought in investment companies who do not understand the land and single-mindedly think that, just because trees store carbon, they are good for the climate: if only it were that simple!

If the landscape is to be saved, we need to stop all these bandwagons and say that there are now enough trees in the Highlands – and, before you say anything, I know some local people who agree with me! No weasly words along the lines “we need more balance of trees and moorland”, or promoting the questionable benefits of trees to climate change mitigation, biodiversity value, and flood mitigation (which there is not time to go into now – there are complex issues involved). Without people standing up and saying “We now have enough trees”, there is no hope of retaining the natural Highland landscape of open moorland, with woodland a minor component (itself a biodiversity feature). And we will continue to have woodland schemes being implemented in ecologically unsuitable and ridiculously silly places, as described elsewhere in this newsletter. The article here on the failed Gairloch scheme explodes the hyperbole of much of the woodland lobby.

Note that sometimes I have been misunderstood. I am not against trees

There are enough trees in the Highlands!

and some relict native woods are indeed beautiful: but just because some is good, does not mean more is better! What I am in favour of is letting nature decide, letting the land being truly wild, with no preconceptions of what 'should' be there.

The infrastructure bandwagons

New wind farms, hydro-schemes, dams, pipes, power stations, draw-down zones, new bulldozed tracks, fences, pylons, phone masts.... Is there anything more to be said? Perhaps only that the renewable energy lobby are so busy saving the planet that they are happy to destroy the little bit of the planet on their own doorstep! For the climate change mitigation bandwagon can be in conflict with conserving nature, in the sense of keeping at least some parts of the planet wild.

Many of the bandwagons involve new access roads and miles of deer fencing, compartmentalising the open land. Will the fences ever be removed, for the remains of Victorian sheep fences still litter the Highland hills over 100 years later? And vehicle access will soon be possible everywhere, with recent experience showing that not even Torridon is sacrosanct.

Peatland restoration bandwagon

Certainly, filling in ditches and removing trees from peatland is to be applauded. But to argue that all peat erosion across the Highlands is caused by humans is just ridiculous. It shows no understanding of the long-term natural dynamics of blanket peat, which cannot go on getting thicker for ever. In the world centre of such peatlands, should we really be taking diggers up into the hills and moving the peat around, destroying in the process several thousand years of natural peatland processes? I thought that, in conservation, natural processes are paramount?

But this action is not about conservation but about slowing erosion and attempting to restart peat growth for the sake of the climate. Whether the putative climatic benefits are realised, at least on the scale promoted, is dubious. For example, pools themselves are erosion features, expanding over time and releasing carbon: so will converting a gully into a pool really restart peat growth? And is it possible to restart growth on ancient bogs which are probably nearing the end of their natural life? And a rewetted eroding bog is more likely to release methane, rather than the previous carbon



Access roads are an essential element of infrastructure and forestry developments, here in Glen Orchy.



Sitka spruce leaping over the forestry fence and invading everywhere

dioxide. Having said that, there is nothing wrong in revegetating exposed peat where the cause is obviously anthropogenic

This is another example of a bandwagon redesigning a natural landscape for our own ends (often money!). What space wildness?

The biodiversity bandwagon

Everyone is talking about biodiversity, and this must be a good thing, surely? Unfortunately the concept is now divorced from any understanding of the long-term ecology of the land, meaning simply “Let’s have as many species as possible.” The fact that much of the Highlands may be naturally species-poor is a concept too difficult for most, as is the concept that adding species to such landscapes may reduce biodiversity at the global scale, resulting in a homogenisation of landscapes across the world. Think of all those trying make Scotland look like Norway: once it is like Norway, then global heterogeneity, the distinctiveness of the Highlands, will be lost. And why is everyone so busy trying

to make rare plants common? Why cannot we just let nature be in charge?

A good bandwagon!

Not all bandwagons are damaging to the landscape. There is one I fully support, which has not really started yet, stuttering on and off over the last few decades: the destruction of invasive plants and animals. For if nothing is done, there is no point in trying to conserve the Highlands at all because the whole landscape will eventually be a new ecology of self-seeded Sitka spruce, rhododendron, cotoneaster, montbretia and many other garden escapes. The self-seeding spruce bandwagon does seem to be picking up momentum, though, but as yet there is no solution to this exponentially increasing problem.

I have always thought that if all the energy of recent decades had been devoted to the control of invasive plants rather than this ‘visionary’ tree planting thing, then the ecology of the Highlands would be in much better shape today. Unfortunately, there is nothing particularly glamorous about the hard slog of removing rhododendron, but the

longer we leave it, the harder it will become.

Any hope for the future?

We will be the last generation able to luxuriate in the glorious openness and untrammelled wildness of the Highland landscape, so beloved of the tourist industry. I feel sorry for the next generation who will inherit, instead, a landscape of a type which is becoming dominant across the world: infrastructure throughout, everything designed,

everything managed. There will be no places where nature remains in charge, no locations where nature can be experienced in the raw. There is not a biodiversity crisis in the Highlands, there is a landscape crisis.

Surely we will all suffer in the long run? And is it really too late to do anything about all this? Is there any hope for the future? Does anyone really care? Is anybody out there? ...

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Author's note: This piece is my swansong as editor of WLN. It presents a personal view and I know that not all my colleagues in the Scottish Wild Land Group will agree with everything I have said here – but I thought I would let rip for a change!

All these issues are discussed in more detail in my book 'Landscape Change in the Scottish Highlands: Imagination and

Reality', published by Whittles and reviewed in the last issue of *Wild Land News*. Interestingly, because the book promotes open moorland, it has been well-received by the field sports lobby but, in contrast, it has been icily ignored by the conservation NGOs – probably because they think moorland should be woodland and and it would appear to be too late for them to turn back!



A view of the Fannichs, showing a remnant of the fast disappearing open Highland landscape