

AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to let people know about a “nature restoration” project that is to take place shortly in Highland Perthshire. The project is likely to be hugely controversial, it already has all the legal permissions and funding it needs to start, and yet virtually no-one knows anything about it. The text below sets out what the project is, why it is controversial, how things have got to this point, and what an alternative might look like. The name of the site will surprise you, and anyone with an interest in rural Scotland will certainly recognize it. It is our well known mountain of Schiehallion, half of which is owned and managed by the John Muir Trust (JMT).

In late summer 2020, lockdown year, neighbours began to hear about radical proposals to establish native montane woodland at the top of the mountain through enclosing the whole of JMT ownership on the Eastern side of the mountain with an electrified deer fence. The details of the new proposals were sketchy to say the least, and the only real information we have to date has been obtained through a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to Scottish Forestry and Nature Scot. It is our judgement that these proposals will desecrate the mountain in all sorts of ways, and we are speaking up about this because no-one else seems to want to do that. It is the method and not the vision that is being objected to.

I am writing this as a native woodland advisor, and I am expressing my environmental concerns. I will declare an interest at the outset in that I am the secretary of the deer group within whose boundaries the project lies. However, this is not a deer group initiative, and the argument is not about deer. The argument is about how best to restore native woodland at scale in a sensitive landscape, with all the pressures and constraints that people are subject to in trying to do so.

This is an argument that has been almost five years in the making. It involves land management proposals for the mountain of Schiehallion, one of our most iconic and recognizable hills, with a national if not international profile, and is unquestionably one of the finest natural heritage assets we have in Highland Perthshire. Unlike many of our Scottish mountains, Schiehallion stands alone in the landscape, visible and very obvious from miles and often tens of miles in every direction. People recognize Schiehallion from other hill tops when they might not recognize anything else. In Gaelic, it's name means the “Faerie hill of the Caledonians”. Hence the title to this article. People will no doubt recognize from this what our thoughts are about what is happening here.

The eastern side of Schiehallion was purchased by the John Muir Trust (JMT) in 1999, and they did an excellent job of re-routing and improving the access path to the top of the mountain. In recent years, they planted some pockets of native woodland on lower ground, and initiated a variety of projects with neighbours under the umbrella of the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership, including the excellent all-abilities circular walk that was installed a few years ago, and which appears to be very well used. These are all positive, practical projects of the sort that the wider public and JMT members would want a conservation group to be doing. The mountain is now a key asset to both visitors and residents alike after this input.

In early February 2025, JMT received notification that Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) would not be required. It is difficult to understand how this might be possible. The checks and balances that should apply have been side stepped.

What is being proposed will irretrievably damage the John Muir Trust as an organization at a time when they already have considerable challenges, both in terms of finances and reputation, and flies against all that they are supposed to believe in. It constitutes a huge reputational risk for their mystery investor, and it exposes our public agencies as being unable to deliver the basic protective functions that we all expect of them.

Almost certainly, few people will be aware of the detail of any of this. The purpose of this article therefore is to set out why we think that:

1. This is a damaging and inappropriate project from an ecological, woodland and landscape perspective
2. It is extraordinarily high risk to both the John Muir Trust and its mystery funder, and
3. The Scottish Forestry process that has been followed is open to challenge, and has indeed just recently been successfully challenged elsewhere.

We set out what a better proposal might look like, which just about everyone looking at this scheme agrees with, and we must now ensure that pressure is brought to bear on JMT so that they might see this as well.

This article will take 45-60 minutes to read, perhaps a bit more, and includes 5 X two minute videos. If you would prefer to download and print off the text for reading, you can do so at this [link](#).

Victor Clements is a native woodland advisor working in Highland Perthshire. He is secretary to a number of deer management groups, including the Breadalbane group within whose boundaries Schiehallion lies. Support for this campaign comes from adjacent farming, business and community interests and others who view this scheme as extremely damaging to their local environment. Several are also members of the John Muir Trust.

Background

As with many environmental groups, corporations and individual estates in recent years, JMT have been alert to the many possibilities arising for restoring habitats and species, and on the face of it, providing a huge opportunity for them as an organization. In 2020, it seemed that environmental improvement schemes would be awash with money, although that has cooled considerably since.

JMT staff had previously recorded montane willow species at the top of the mountain, (which is not unusual in the Breadalbane hills, they are scattered throughout), and a project idea formed to reinstate montane habitat on Schiehallion. Montane woodland is very topical in Scotland at the moment, native woodland types tend to get very excited about it, and all sorts of people seem very happy to throw money in this direction. Although you will often find scattered montane woodland seedlings in our hills, it is almost non-existent as a coherent habitat type, largely because native woodland as a whole has been reduced to such a small area, and this makes montane woodland much more vulnerable to extinction. Typically, you get small numbers of individual bushes on inaccessible rock faces and burn sides, safe from grazing, human exploitation and fire.

JMT suggest that they have funding to take forwards such a project. Whether that is an individual, a company or some sort of trust is not known, or it may be some sort of carbon trading arrangement. While montane woodland will not sequester much CO2 from the atmosphere, you can see why doing something significant on Schiehallion would be regarded as a prestige project, and people would certainly express interest in being associated with a high profile project on such an iconic mountain.

To be clear, no-one objects to the principle or aspiration of doing this, and the exact source of funding is not important in understanding this as an issue.

The Proposal

JMT made neighbours aware at the outset that their plan was to put an electric deer fence around their side of the mountain, but leaving a section open at the top. This was for both practical construction reasons, and the impact this might have on walkers, no-one wanting a deer fence to be visible from the summit. Such a fence would, in theory, allow JMT to develop their montane woodland plans inside an enclosure where they could work independently of what was taking place on adjacent ground. JMT spoke to some neighbours but not others, and did so on a one to one basis. There was no collective discussion, and no open meeting to discuss proposals. This was the initial "consultation".

JMT Approach to communications

From the outset, JMT's only contribution to letting others know what they were doing was a map of a deer fence following their boundary, and we had no idea what might be being planned for within the area. JMT East Schiehallion is 871 ha, meaning that this was potentially an 871 ha woodland restoration scheme, which is very large even by Scottish standards. From a planning perspective for neighbours, it had to be treated as such.

Because the scheme was not to be funded through the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS), the normal consultation requirements and oversight did not apply, and this proved to be hugely complicating for everyone involved.

The JMT approach from the outset, communicated to anyone who expressed concern, was that this was their land and they could manage it as they pleased.

A request for information received the reply that JMT "would look forward to your full support and co-operation". Charming! By this point, they had actually left their local deer management group, citing their intention to set up an alternative structure, which has never happened. They are on their own in this endeavor.

Neighbour Concerns

Neighbours and others who have seen this had three main concerns, which we will go in to a bit more detail on later, but in summary:

1. Electrified deer fences straight up and down both the north and south sides of the mountain would gradually cause a divergence in vegetation types with grazing on one side, and none on the other, and this would become very apparent in the landscape. This would be a particular problem with a mountain that is so visible from almost every direction.

2. The enclosed area would include a significant part of the Schiehallion SSSI, designated for its limestone pavement and montage assemblage growing on base rich soil types, which was in favourable condition and which requires to be grazed.
3. The large fenced enclosure, open at the top, would act as a big lobster pot, potentially concentrating deer impacts within the enclosure, not reducing them, and potentially causing severe animal welfare problems inside and outwith the enclosure if proper communications with neighbours were not forthcoming. There has been no communication with neighbours on the deer front at all. JMT have signaled very clearly that there is not likely to be in the future either.

In addition to this, although 99.9% of walkers visiting the mountain will walk up the defined path, a proportion of people will inevitably want to do their own thing, or will certainly want to defend the principle of being able to do so. An electrified deer fence constrains their ability to do this. You might imagine that JMT members above all people might understand this point.

Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests

Since we became aware of this project in August 2020, the only useful information we have received about this project has been a series of FOI requests, to both Nature Scot and Scottish Forestry. No information has been forthcoming from the John Muir Trust, and no information has been received from either Nature Scot or Scottish Forestry, EXCEPT through FOI. The relevance of this will be covered later.

To try and keep track of what was going on, we had to submit FOI requests in 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024 and now again in 2025.

2020

Our initial FOI request in autumn 2020 showed that Scottish Forestry were not involved, and that it was Nature Scot that were dealing with the proposal. At this point, Nature Scot were almost exclusively focused on the Schiehallion SSSI, keen to ensure that trees were not planted on it, and wanting to see grazing maintained in order to keep the montane assemblage of habitats in good condition. Looking in from the outside, it seemed very clear that the presence of the SSSI alone would mean that such a scheme could never work, and Nature Scot were being delightfully pedantic in their attitude to this. For this reason, I thought this scheme could never go anywhere, and local concerns quickly subsided.

2021

No FOIs submitted, and seemingly, very little progress in taking the project forward.

2022

By 2022, JMT had launched a very vague consultation. We knew that local responses had been largely negative with reference to the means, if not the vision, but the consultation summary cherry-picked positive comments from responses, and included supportive documents from a small number of their very committed supporters and advisors. In general, they were commenting on the principle, not the scheme being proposed, which to be fair, was very vague indeed.

This consultation summary document was highly misleading, and persuaded us to submit another FOI. By this point, there was very little communication with Nature Scot, with all

substantive communications going to Scottish Forestry. Interestingly, all these communications were from JMT to Scottish Forestry, with virtually nothing in return.

This included JMT asking Scottish Forestry to make a determination on whether an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was required. In Scotland, however a woodland scheme is funded, Scottish Forestry must legally be asked to make a determination on whether an EIA is required if more than two hectares of woodland is to be established on a sensitive site. East Scheihallion qualified as a sensitive site on two accounts: the presence of the SSSI, and the fact that the area was a key part of the Loch Rannoch and Glen Lyon National Scenic Area (NSA).

The 2022 FOI information, for the first time, gave us a map of what was proposed, which was a 250 ha native woodland scheme. Situated on the south side of the mountain, and stretching from the watercourse in Gleann Mhor up to the summit, with nothing planted in the SSSI at all. So, despite the incentive for this project being montane willows found on the north side of the mountain within the SSSI, JMT were now choosing to avoid the designated area completely. (There is a map later in this article showing the relevant areas so that you can visualize it). However, what this meant was that JMT were suggesting that they would build an enclosure that would simultaneously require low grazing pressure on one side of the mountain and high grazing pressure on the other side. Clearly, this is not possible.

On seeing this, and the confusion that was clearly evident, we asked Scottish Forestry to formally call the scheme in for full EIA. Obviously, JMT did not take too kindly to this, but a proper EIA process was the only transparent way of bringing some sort of formal oversight to the project. Towards the end of 2022, Scottish Forestry agreed that they would begin a process of formal determination on whether EIA was required. This at least meant that JMT could not simply begin work on the project until Scottish Forestry had given a view. To my mind at this point, there was no way that this project was ever going to be given consent, given the risks and sensitivities around it.

2023

Having done the right thing, Scottish Forestry then promptly sat on things for 8 months without giving JMT any clear steer on what was required of them. JMT complained, and we sympathized. This is all too often the private sector experience.

We did another FOI to check what the problem was. That gave us two concerns, one from Scottish Forestry, and one from Nature Scot.

The FOI response to Scottish Forestry unveiled an email from 14/11/22, seemingly from their Conservator, suggesting that differences of opinion to all this were motivated by "local politics". This suggested to us they were more interested in the intrigue and not the issue, and that legitimate local concerns were perhaps not being taken seriously. They readily admitted to not having much experience in EIA.

The Nature Scot FOI information uncovered something more worrying. On 22/2/23, JMT received SSSI consent for their proposals "by mistake", despite having undertaken no analysis of what impact the removal of grazing might have on the site. Instead of revoking the consent, Nature Scot effectively said, and I paraphrase here, "lets just keep an eye on things and we will try to change things if we have to."

To give some context to this, Nature Scot had initially determined when first informed about the scheme on 18/9/2020 that "fencing the entire area of the SSSI within JMT ownership would risk a very significant decline on the SSSI feature condition". This implies that a fairly stringent and prescriptive grazing plan would have been required, but that was now not necessary.

One of the key protections that we thought would stop the scheme had effectively been side stepped.

No private landowner in Scotland has ever, ever received SSSI consent for operations "by mistake". That simply does not happen. Nature Scot make normal people bend over backwards to get permission to do anything at all, but apparently not in this case.

We can speculate what has happened here, but let me just say simply that I am thinking bad thoughts about what may have occurred, and leave it at that.

Scottish Forestry did however support us on one point.

You will possibly have heard of Schrodinger's Cat? If you have not, it is a thought experiment between physicists where a cat in a box can be simultaneously both alive and dead, as long as no-one actually opens the box to see what is in there.

When it was first suggested that this project might be subject to EIA, there was a suggestion from JMT that this was not a woodland project, simply an enclosure in which they were planting some trees, despite their aim of creating woodland habitat. It is a bit like the Philosopher's Beard, "Is this a beard upon my chin, or just a few hairs?." They tried to suggest that because they were looking to encourage natural regeneration, then this should not be subject to EIA.

Scottish Forestry helpfully confirmed that natural regeneration is afforestation, and therefore, EIA legislation does apply.

So, this project is now effectively Schrodinger's Native Woodland Project on two accounts. Not only is it trying to be a woodland and not be a woodland at the same time, it is also simultaneously trying to deliver both high and low grazing impacts within the enclosure. This bending over backwards to avoid oversight is obviously only possible if no-one decides that they are going to have a look at the site, because if they do, then the game is up.

2024

We did another FOI in July 2024 for a further update. JMT had been spending a lot of money on external surveys, but were not actually addressing any of the key concerns.

There is a barbed comment from JMT regarding consultation: "It is not uncommon during consultations, that respondents who support plans feel that engagement has been sufficient, and those that do not support it feel as if it is not."

To be clear about this, no-one has ever received any information from JMT on which they could properly form a view of what was going on. The "consultation" documents they had previously devised were written as if they were addressing an eight year old. There has never been a community drop in session, any opportunity provided for collective

discussion or any accurate collation of responses. All information received to date is through FOI. This is why we say the consultation was not appropriate.

In August 2024, Scottish Forestry asked that a consultation exercise be opened again. We don't know who replied or what they said. We don't know this because Scottish Forestry never provided a summary of the responses. When people asked for this, we were told that the only legal way to get the information was through FOI, despite the forestry industry being entirely comfortable with the idea of issues logs, where key issues and their mitigation can be summarized. Scottish Forestry could easily have done this, but they did not. We don't know at this stage whether the responses were considered at all, whether a summary document was produced, or whether this had any influence at all on the outcome.

There were two other interesting snippets in the 2024 FOI material:

1. JMT had commissioned a survey of peat depths across the whole site. Of the 415 test pits (a lot of information), virtually all had a peat depth greater than 5 cms, as you might expect for a moorland site. Technically, this means all the soils on Schiehallion surveyed are "carbon rich", where afforestation, even with native species, is likely to create a net CO2 release. This is important for carbon equations.
2. One advisor who looked at the proposals, and who knows more about the practicalities of growing montane woodland in Scotland than anyone else, remarked that electric fences at high altitude were "largely experimental". He went on to say that fencing contractors are unlikely to engage with such a project, with costs being exceptionally difficult to estimate, and the potential risk to reputation being so high.

I have experience of this second point myself with a similarly contentious proposal to fence an estate in Assynt. Many contractors simply did not participate, citing reputational damage, and leaving only one tender. This project fell apart when confronted with reality. It is inevitable that this Schiehallion project will come unstuck as well, and in a way that will be damaging for all concerned.

2025

In early February 2025, neighbouring owners were surprised to receive an email from JMT to say that Scottish Forestry had determined that a full EIA would not actually be required. This gives them all the authority they require to progress with the project, and we can assume that practical planning has now begun, establishing costs and confirming funding.

We have just submitted two more FOI requests to Scottish Forestry and Nature Scot to see how this decision has been made.

While we wait for those to come through, we have decided that now is the time to air our concerns before this project becomes too advanced.

In the remainder of this article, we are going to set out more clearly why all this is a problem. However, in the spirit of "no criticism without recommendation", I would like to set out what a more viable alternative might be.

Is there an alternative approach?

After the last Ice Age when the ice retreated, native woodland will have spread quickly through the straths and glens of Scotland, and then more slowly up the sides of the mountains until it got to a height where no trees or shrubs of any kind could survive. The higher up the trees went, the fewer species were adapted to the conditions. With willows in particular, there will have been hybridizations, and probably some random genetic changes, and some of these will have created variants of species that were better able to survive than others, which is why you get distinctive willow species in particular at these higher elevations. Crucially, they were part of a continuous woodland network that stretched up from the floor of the glens.

In the centuries and indeed thousands of years since, almost all of the lower woodland has disappeared. A lot of this was down to the influence of man through over-exploitation, burning and grazing, but there was also a parallel process of a changing climate becoming cooler and wetter, and favouring peatland formation over woodland. The montane fragments survived because they had no real value, and they were usually on inaccessible ledges and the sides of watercourses. Little fragments have survived the 5-6000 years through to today. We see these and think it would be wonderful to have them back, but it is important to think how they got up to the top of the mountain to start with. They got up there because trees were able to regenerate up the mountain from below.

There are places in Scotland, mostly in the Cairngorms, where there is a near natural treeline, and in those locations, it is appropriate to be thinking about re-instating montane woodland.

But what do you do when almost all the surrounding area is devoid of trees, as the east side of Schiehallion is? If you plant montane species at the top of the mountain, they will always be vulnerable, and they will never be able to function in any ecological sense because they are isolated and separated from any woodland below.

The alternative approach here, which almost everyone agrees with, is to establish a significant area of native woodland around the base of the mountain first, stretching up towards the middle slopes. When this is mature enough to produce seed, say 25-30 years from now, JMT would have a seed source that could then potentially spread of its own accord up the mountain, and do so in a more natural way.

Yes, it will probably take 100 years to get to the top of the mountain, but this is the reality of the exercise at hand, and we have to accept that. Get the first rungs of the ladder in place at the outset. If they are not there, montane willow cannot function, and will always be prone to extinction again.

No-one will object to JMT planting 2-300 hectares of native woodland in this way, and it will avoid all the negative side effects of what they are currently proposing.

This is the alternative vision being put forwards.

VIDEOS

Before looking at the problems as we see it, there follows a sequence of 5 X two minute videos. These are included to allow people to visualize what it is we are talking about here.

There are a few rough edges in some of the videos, but hopefully, these will give people a good feel for what is being described in the text.

Video 1

This allows people to get their bearings, see what the proposal is, and what the alternative might be.

<https://youtu.be/NI9oRqPa934?si=v2iWnIQQ6p7cd1VN>

Video 2

This shows an area that is already enclosed, and shows what additional planting area might be possible. The enclosed area is part of an FGS scheme, but there are actually very few trees evident in there at all. It is not readily apparent why that is, or on what timeline this site is supposed to move forwards on.

https://youtu.be/xrEYGewqOY?si=g_d16PB_Gu55lmS4

Video 3

This is a short discussion about fences, and whether or not they are appropriate for this scheme.

<https://youtu.be/EWESetzbWvA?si=YKBhHOByqHVKS429>

Video 4

This looks again at the potential planting areas at the base of the mountain, and suggests what species mixture might be possible.

<https://youtu.be/sNLOIKCQx9E?si=QeDnL1VwIGI60X3Q>

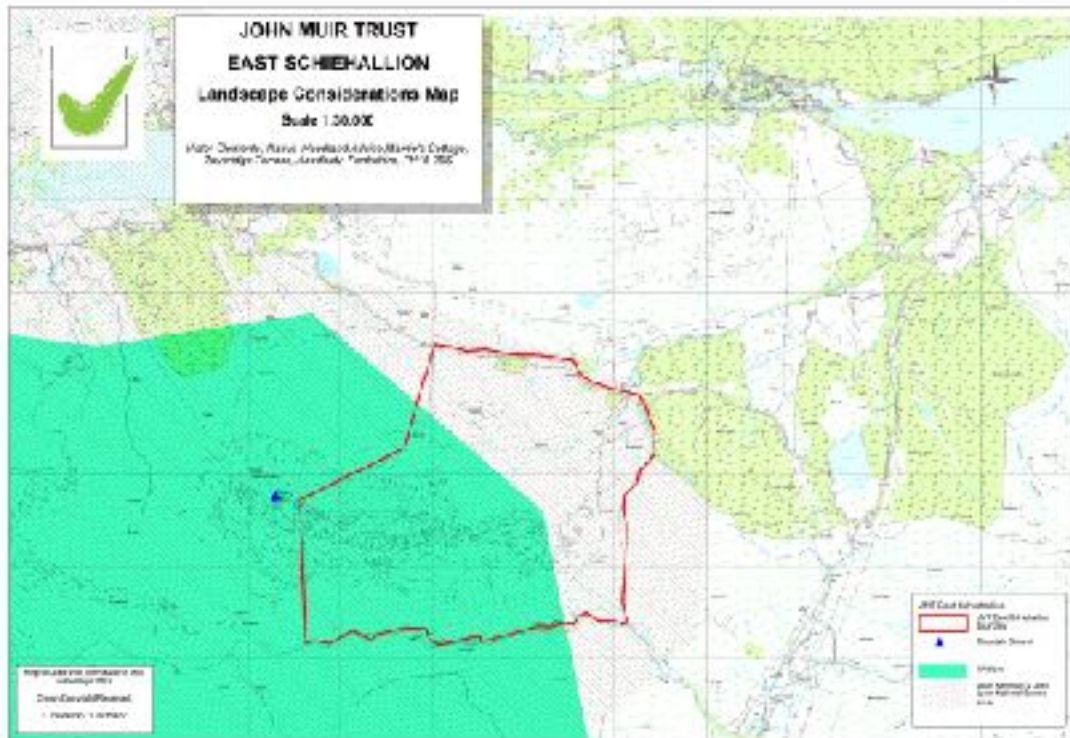
Video 5

This shows the boundary between JMT and the property to the west, and explains why different grazing regimes on either side of this boundary will create a problem.

https://youtu.be/hY0kNs0E_Ds?si=VvCLht1imp1qBtkd

The Landscape Problem

Schiehallion is a key feature within the Loch Rannoch & Glen Lyon National Scenic Area (NSA), and is also covered by an area classified as wild land. Ironically, it was the John Muir Trust who lobbied successfully to have this wild land classification, with the objective of keeping these landscapes free of human made features, an aspiration to which I would imagine almost all JMT members will readily agree with. You can see the areas concerned on this map below.



The electrified deer fences will extend well in to the wild land areas on both the north and south faces of the mountain. The fences themselves will be visible, but more important will be the affect that they might have on grazing pressures on either side of the fence.

JMT will say that they need the fence, and that grazing pressure on adjacent properties is too high. However, as we shall see in the next section, the habitats in that general area require to be grazed to keep them in good condition, and that includes designated habitats. So, grazing levels on adjacent properties are largely appropriate for the habitats there. The problem is that this will be too high for montane willows, which cannot tolerate any grazing pressure at all as they are so palatable, and grow so slowly.

An area of no grazing adjacent to an area of high grazing, separated by a straight fence, is going to lead to a straight line up the mountain, that will be visible from all directions.

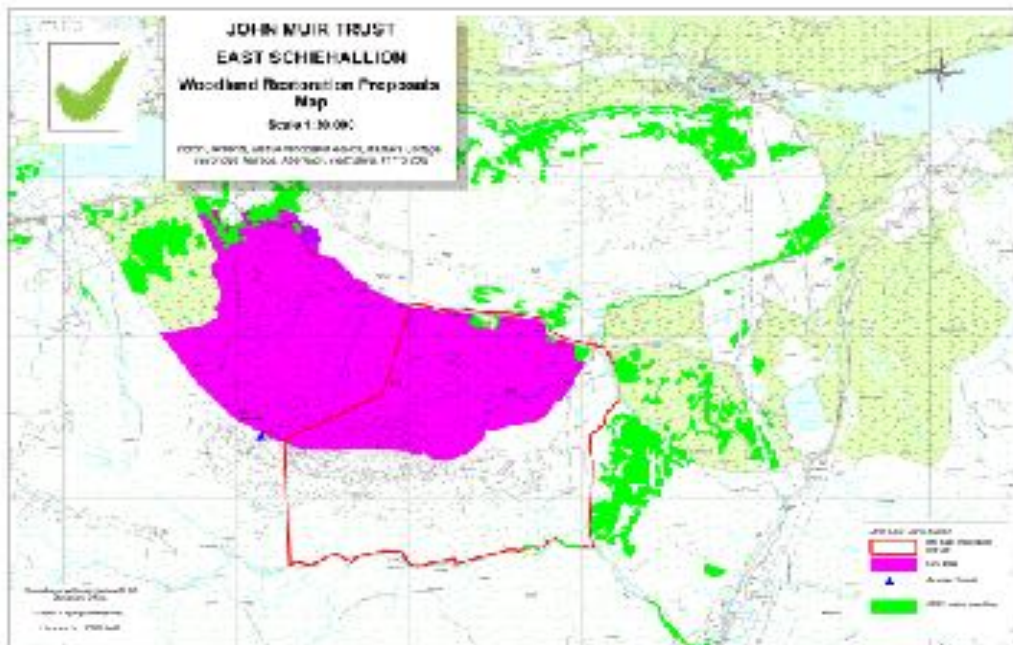
That outcome is easily foreseen, and totally unacceptable in this situation.

You can see from the map above, that it would be possible to plant a significant area of native woodland further down the mountain, outwith the wild land area completely, and this would deal with all the major issues with this scheme. The next generation can then take this up the mountain if they want to do that.

If you want to know what differential grazing levels can do in a landscape, see below this photo from Glen Shee. This is perhaps a more extreme example, but the principle is the same. JMT cannot manage half a mountain without reference to what other people are doing, much as they think that is their right to do so. Can you imagine what people might say in 20 years' time if Schiehallion looked like this in the landscape, with grazing on one side of a fence, but not the other?



The Designated site problem.



The map above shows the Schiehallion SSSI designated site, shown in purple. It covers much of the northern part of JMT East Schiehallion (bounded by red line), and stretches on to the property to the west.

You can find background information on the site at this link.
<https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/1411>

Shown in green on the above map are the areas of native woodland surveyed in the Native Woodlands of Scotland Survey (NWSS) published in 2014. There is virtually no native woodland on the JMT property as a whole, other than a very nice but relatively small area of riparian woodland in Gleann Mhor, and a limited area around the Braes of Foss.

You can take the view that this is a deficiency that should be addressed, and that is fine, but the reality is that in terms of natural heritage considerations on Schiehallion, the designated upland site is by far the priority consideration. Nothing else is more important, other than landscape considerations, see above.

This is where things get interesting.

While the underlying geology of much of the Highlands is acidic and nutrient poor, the Breadalbane hills are base rich, and Schiehallion itself is actually underlain by limestone. The designated features are limestone pavement, and the montane assemblage of species which includes calcareous grassland on thin limestone soils, as well as a series of important flushes (areas of groundwater seepage).

The grasslands are located on "sugar limestone", and are the best in Perthshire, and extremely valuable in a Scottish context. They are in fact one of only a very small number of such drier sites in the country.

Currently, these features are listed in favourable condition, and crucially, they require to be grazed. While Schiehallion might be considered to be heavily grazed from a woodland perspective, it needs this level of grazing for the SSSI.

If we are interested in biodiversity, then we need to manage these features properly, because they are rare in Scotland.

The Site Condition Statement, found at the above link states:

" Habitats of the site as a whole would need to be considered if grazing pressures where to be reduced. The grasslands need a certain level of grazing to prevent heath encroachment and the current grazing appears appropriate for this."

"Continuity of grazing at appropriate levels is essential to maintain the condition of the limestone habitats, calcareous grassland, flushes and associated species and to prevent excessive invasion from birch"

The assessment above welcomes grazing, and discourages woodland growth on the higher parts of the mountain. The objectives of management also include keeping rock outcrops free of regeneration.

This is why on 18/9/2020, local Nature Scot staff came to the conclusion that removal of grazing could be so damaging. Nevertheless, their organization subsequently agreed (apparently by mistake) to this and gave SSSI consent without any proper analysis or grazing plan, or what they might do if things started to go wrong, which of course, they are highly likely to do, and this can be readily foreseen.

The Deer (& sheep) Problem

The proposed fences are only required because deer and sheep are present. Both are drawn to the mountain because it is so fertile, the heather moorland provides good feeding in certain wind conditions, and this has been the case for generations. Nature Scot deem grazing levels to be appropriate to the SSSI, and habitat monitoring data I have seen shows long term heather increment growth, suggesting the heather is not overgrazed. Indeed, one issue that can be avoided by grazing is the heather heath spreading on to the distinctive grassland communities.

The sheep could potentially be managed by some shepherding arrangement without the need for extensive fencing, although the pull of the fertile habitats is very strong, and this would be very difficult, requiring long-term commitment.

The deer of course are more difficult to control, with the two options being fencing or culling, or a mixture of both.

This is where the problem arises. The grazing pressure required to maintain the limestone habitats on East Schiehallion, currently provided by deer only, is too high for woodland establishment. One requires relatively high densities, the other requires almost zero tolerance of numbers. Almost everyone agrees with this, as montane willows are so palatable and slow growing, with a very short season. They will be vulnerable for many, many decades, and well beyond the lifetime of any fence.

While JMT says deer numbers are too high, it actually depends on what objective you are managing to. Managing for montane woodland sets up a conflict, even within their own property, and this cannot be resolved. The answer is not to create that conflict in the first place, but to think more strategically about what it is that you are trying to do and to take others with you.

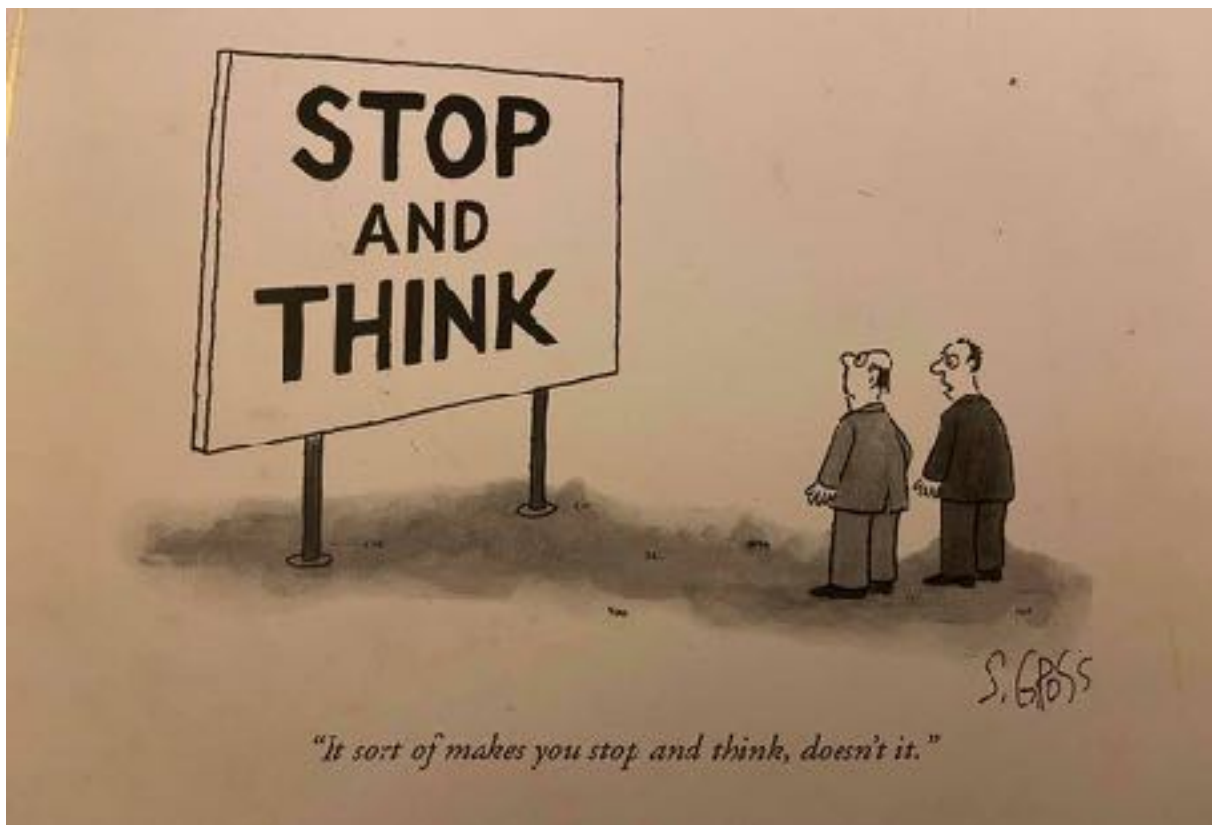
All the neighbouring owners and stalkers have many decades of experience of observing deer in that area. All consider that deer will be able to enter the enclosure from the top of the mountain. Once in, they will tend to gravitate towards both the top of the mountain, and the south facing slopes. This is where the sensitive new woodlands would be planted, and they could very quickly do a lot of damage. The worst-case scenario is that they come in during the summer when shooting hinds and young calves is not possible.

Other deer may find their access to Schiehallion blocked by the fence, and will be deflected in to other areas where they may do damage. There is potential for severe welfare implications. To avoid all this, there would need to be a very robust deer plan, but no such plan exists, and nor does JMT want to create one. JMT say they will deal with problems if they arise, and that seems to be acceptable to Scottish Forestry, but they will not be in control of the situation they have then created.

The deer are a problem, not because their numbers are inappropriate, but because they have been given no consideration whatsoever. For those of us who work in the sector, for a whole range of management objectives, including woodland, this situation is unacceptable.

Stop and Think

People might recognize the following online meme.



The objective of this article is to ask people to step back and think about what they are doing here. The project, which will begin shortly if it is not effectively challenged, is extraordinarily risky for both the John Muir Trust and whoever is funding this. The level of risk in terms of cost, damage to reputation and poor outcomes is completely off the scale.

As a woodland advisor, if someone was asking me for advice on such an idea, I would be duty bound to tell them this.

This subject needs to be brought to public attention, and that is what we are doing now.

We are not asking anyone for money. What we do need is help from people to raise the profile of this issue. Put pressure on JMT to change their minds. Write to the papers, contact your elected representatives, take part in online discussions on the issue. Convince JMT that there is a better alternative. Save the pointy mountain if we can. We can do the running, but we need others to help.

In the meantime, we have to think about a legal challenge.

There are two grounds for this:

1. The SSSI consent that was mistakenly awarded is very obviously against all due process, and this should now be relatively straightforward to overturn.
2. It was reported recently that an environmental NGO had in fact successfully challenged Scottish Forestry in the way that they have been handling consultations and communications for EIAs. Their specific point is that they were not

communicating information to stakeholders, and only making information available through FOI, which is exactly our experience. That has been found to be unlawful.

These are fights that it should be possible to win. JMT need to be careful not to commit themselves to fencing contracts worth possibly upwards of £250,000 or possibly much, much more, with the outcome of all this still uncertain.

The title of this article is called "Away with the fairies", which of course means that people are trying to do something that is just plain crazy. But the fairies of course are not benign if you get on the wrong side of them. If this scheme goes ahead, is dogged with misfortune and escalating costs over many years, and results in appalling environmental damage, then anyone involved will have no-one to blame but themselves.

For that reason, as well as protecting the mountain itself, we need to stop this project now.

Reader Feedback

For feedback on this article please email: victor@nativewoods.co.uk