

# Ennerdale – celebrating the wild and the exceptional

*In June 2013, 70 people gathered in Ennerdale. We walked in this Lake District valley to mark 10 years of the Wild Ennerdale partnership, which oversees one of England's most significant wilding sites. The observations and discussion soon revealed that grazing is a contentious issue in a project that promotes natural processes...*

## ALISON PARFITT

The landowning partners who have coordinated the efforts behind Wild Ennerdale<sup>1</sup> are the Forestry Commission, National Trust and United Utilities. They have much to celebrate<sup>2</sup>, not least that they continue to make the partnership work and stay committed to their vision “to allow the evolution of Ennerdale as a wild valley for the benefit of people, relying more on natural processes to shape its landscape and ecology”. But others who contribute should celebrate too, such as the supporting staff of Natural England and local people. As we reviewed what was happening on the ground, Sir John Lawton, lead author of the pivotal *Making Space for Nature* report in 2010 on thinking big in conservation, made approving noises as we heard from Richard Maxwell, a tenant farmer.

Richard was talking about his Galloway cattle that roam part of Ennerdale and how they fare, birthing in the forest without any help, for instance. He reported that he and his wife, Alison, had altered their farming methods because of their Wild Ennerdale experience. The lower inputs in practice mean less feed and only giving medication if demonstrably needed, rather than as routine. The lower costs meant that even with fewer animals they gained a good return, including the HLS subsidy. And they have also gone organic on their farm. For some participants, hearing Richard’s direct experience and the reality of helping deliver a core part of the vision, was a highlight.

## Ennerdale’s community and brew

You might think it odd to be emphasising farming in a project centred on wilding and natural processes. But Gareth Browning, Area Forester West Cumbria and a coordinator of Wild Ennerdale, sees supportive relationships with local farmers as essential to Wild Ennerdale’s success. The importance of relationships with farmers also came up when hearing from some of the National Trust staff who look after so many other Lake District valleys. Community relations figured again as a volunteer described the developing community hub and information centre close by at Ennerdale Bridge. And after our walk we sampled the Ennerdale Brewery’s Wild Ennerdale beer. It is important to foster an understanding of the ethos and aspiration of Wild Ennerdale amongst local people, so they support the vision and see it as relevant to their lives, from generation to generation. It’s our children and

their children, the locals and visitors of the future, who will be able to experience Wild Ennerdale even more than we can.<sup>3</sup> This notion of continuance, at all levels, was on my mind given the uncertainty over the Forestry Commission and our public forest estate. Agencies, organisations, schemes and funding can come and go, while local people provide the anchor. It is their connection to places and their stories which ultimately keep the threads.

### Borrowdale and Ennerdale

Before the Ennerdale event, three of us from the Wildland Research Institute<sup>4</sup> had climbed up from Borrowdale, by Great Gable, Inominate Tarn and Haystacks and then down into Ennerdale from High Stile on the northern ridge of the valley. We bring students to Ennerdale every year, arriving the usual way, along the track by the lake from the west. I had always wanted to come into the valley from the no-road end and experience 'the long walk in'. At the beginning of our walk we looked down on Borrowdale from above Seathwaite and noticed the canalised bits of river, what looked like an abandoned small fish farm and mused about how that river worked and how the economics of that farm totted up. Those casual observations suggest that it is different from what is happening in Ennerdale. In much the same way that there were informative lessons observed when the free ranging River Liza in Ennerdale coped with torrential rain in 2009 that in the parallel valley to the north caused so much devastation in Cockermouth and loss of a life in Workington.<sup>5</sup> I wonder what a comparison of environmental, social and economic factors in Borrowdale and Ennerdale would show? What are the costs and benefits of the apparent greater intervention in Borrowdale? Do the tenant farmers in Borrowdale 'see the light' and engage in the bigger-picture land management environmental issues (and then go organic) as Richard Maxwell is doing in Ennerdale? And if they did what would happen to that particular Lake District landscape and wildlife? Are there pointers and more learning from what is happening in Ennerdale beyond its interest as a more wild valley?

### Beyond intervention grazing

Other conversations about wilding at the event were starting from points 'beyond conservation' and 'beyond intervention grazing'. In Silver Cove, the area where we usually find Richard's cattle, I never cease to be amazed at the dramatic profusion of growth and recovery in the exclusion pens. Yes, we know that the cattle churn up the ground which is deemed useful for wildlife and further up under Lingmell the rowan, oak and birch regeneration is dense in places and only held back by the shading of conifers. Nonetheless, this evidence shows how a handful of cattle eat a lot, so very little vegetation gets away.

The journalist George Monbiot joined us. He gave a performance of a talk, drawing upon his book *Feral*. He discussed conservation practices which attempt to manage natural process and habitats... "Why DO we do this?" he asked insistently.<sup>6</sup> He highlighted the damage done to the uplands by generations of sheep grazing ... the "woolly maggots" of upland pastures (See Simon Ayers article in this issue of ECOS for more). This stoked remarks from participants, including:



Wild grazing at Ennerdale

Photo: [www.robgrange.co.uk](http://www.robgrange.co.uk)

"We are never going to be able to have real wild land unless we, like the USA and the PAN Parks in Europe, designate land separately."

"If we would use IUCN categories for protected areas and work with those distinctions, we would see our way more clearly through the distinctions ... and gain a sense of how we could work towards having real wild land" ... "and what a revelation that would be" ...

"What has agriculture (livestock grazing) to do with wilding?" ... "subsidy is blurring conservation with agricultural land management".

Reflecting on the event's discussion of grazing, Gareth Browning remarked: "I understand there are aspirations for no-grazing rewilding but taking the farming community along by changing and reducing grazing from intensive sheep to extensive cattle is delivering benefits... There are a number of future pathways<sup>7</sup> and there are large areas of Ennerdale that are not grazed and will continue so. Extensive cattle grazing is a tool to move away from intensive sheep grazing. I don't think of it as farming but it is useful and easier to call it such when discussing with the farming community".<sup>8</sup>

### Nature incomplete?

After all this and remembering the solitary miniature juniper we had seen by Inominate Tarn, I had a look at *Flora of the Fells, Celebrating Cumbria's Mountains Landscapes*<sup>9</sup> to get a better understanding of potential vegetation without grazers on the fells. Those of us interested in wilding need to hang on to our aspirations that farming livestock and conservation grazing are not part of a vision for wild and ecologically 'whole' self-willed land. And that much as I love our variety of

landscapes, ecological and cultural, I hanker after that real wild land too. My experience and understanding of nature is incomplete without it. Meanwhile, I am noticing and appreciating what is happening in Ennerdale now and wondering if other places and farmers could do the same. Hearing Richard and Alison Maxwell's story is a powerful message for more wholesome integrated land management in many places. There is a spectrum of possibilities for wilder land, and associated livelihoods, and much as I yearn to experience the wildest options, the best should not be the enemy of the good.

## References and notes

1. <http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk/>
2. Probably the most significant achievement in terms of restoring natural processes is the restoration of spawning grounds for char and salmon on Woundel Beck and the lower River Liza. Through combined working with the Environment Agency, a forest road and bridge have been removed which has restored natural gravel movement downstream and fish access to spawning ground upstream. In response to this char spawning numbers on the mediaval named "Charr dubb" have increased from a handful to many hundreds in the last five years and salmon have returned to spawn on the higher reaches of Woundell Beck for the first time in decades. In addition the removal of the forest road and bridge have increased the sense of tranquillity and wildness to the area through a reduction in traffic.
3. It is significant that Rachel Oakley, the National Trust Project Officer for Wild Ennerdale from early days has, like Gareth, had a continual focus on developing community engagement. Recently, a visiting researcher from the US Forestry Service fell upon my copy of Rachel's book of pictures produced by Ennerdale Primary School children about Wild Ennerdale and made off with it saying how much she would like to see this sort of engagement happening in her area.
4. <http://www.wildlandresearch.org/>
5. See 'Lakeland valleys and Somerset hills – a tale of two managements' by Peter Taylor *ECOS* 31(3-4) 30-34, for more about River Liza in Ennerdale, the different way that two Lakeland valleys coped with the 2009 torrent and the slow cultural change that underpins Wild Ennerdale
6. <http://www.monbiot.com/2013/07/16/the-naturalists-who-are-terrified-of-nature/>
7. The notion of developing future natural in Ennerdale was also mentioned but not defined as discussion on the night swept on.
8. Gareth Browning, pers com
9. Varley M. (ed) (2003) *Flora of the Fells, Celebrating Cumbria's Mountain Landscapes*. Friends of the lake District and English Nature [www.floraofthefells.com](http://www.floraofthefells.com)

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