Private and networked: Large Conservation Areas in Scotland

Scotland contains large conservation areas of many kinds. These range from estates managed as vast nature reserves or with conservation in mind, through collaborations between neighbouring properties to projects to create ecological networks or promote conservation over large tracts of country.

William M. Adams

The Lawton report's sound bite conclusion that English conservation needed 'more, bigger, better and joined' areas of wildlife habitat[1] might suggest that Scotland is likely to be ahead of the game on large scale conservation. Certainly the idea of large protected areas is long established in Scotland. Britain's first National Nature Reserve was a Scottish mountain, Beinn Eighe, and the roll-call of reserves of different kinds created since the 1950s continued the theme: Rum, Ben More Coigach, Ben Lawers Mar Lodge, Forsinard, Abernethy - the list is long and speaks of conservation writ large, on a mountainous scale. Much of Scotland is upland, a marked contrast and a different context to the lowland landscapes that dominate much of England.

Scotland has also adopted a series of what Richard Hobbs describes as 'progressive forward-looking strategies'[2] not only in specific fields like woodland restoration (in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the Scottish Forestry Strategy)[3], but arguably even in the much more generic Land Use Strategy, which specifically talks about the ecosystem approach and adapting to climate change.[4]

Thinking about conservation in Scotland while living in the flatlands of eastern England, farmed and urbanised within an inch of their life, drives home the many ways in which conservation in Scotland is distinctive.[5] The study of large scale conservation (LSC) projects across Great Britain, reported elsewhere in this issue[6], recognised this same point. How and why is Scotland different?

Space to be different

Since the Nature Conservancy Council was broken up in 1992, conservation policies in Scotland, Wales and England have kept going more or less in the same direction, but as a convoy not a single ship. The variations, as summarised immediately below, reflect both the ideas of Scottish conservationists, and the very different environmental, political and economic context.[7]

The RSPB's Loch Garten - home of the Osprey Centre and restored pinewoods.
Photo: Bill Adams

Ideas of Nation: Thinking about large scale conservation in Scotland is influenced by ideas of Nation, and the evolving public response to devolved government. There is a certain openness to ideas about new ways of operating, an interest in the future shape of land and landscape, and a sense of justice, that England mostly lacks. Rights of access to land in Scotland are widely understood very differently, and have a different legal basis: the Scottish Outdoor Access Code allows the right of responsible access to much of Scotland's land and water.[8] The Land Reform (Scotland) Act, 2003 creates the opportunity for local communities to buy land, opening up the possibility of land reform, on the model previously used on Eigg.[9] The 2003 Act has not led to a transformation of land ownership, but the expectation is real enough, as is the potential in law.[10, 11]

Ideas of Nature: Thinking about conservation is informed by ideas of nature, themselves bound up with the history of the country.[12, 13] Ideas of large landscapes for nature tend to be seen in terms the history of the highlands, the clearances, the history of landholding and the rise of the 'sporting' estate. Ideas such as wildness or wilderness that seem to strike such a chord in England, are received very differently in Scotland. To some people, remote wild lands speak of eviction as much or more than any romantic sense of the wonders of wild nature. Shooting estates are part of the structure of contemporary rural economy and society in large areas of Scotland, but the ideas of nature they reflect are deeply contested. Large scale conservation may in some ways be enabled by patterns of landholding, but it is also burdened by romanticised notions of sport and nature, and the ideological weight of the clearances.[14]

The nature of rural society and economy: A big difference between England and Scotland is the concentration of landholding in Scotland[15]: There are big estates in England, but in Scotland they are ubiquitous. Half of the land area of Scotland is held by fewer than 600 owners, and sporting estates comprise over 40% of all private land in Scotland.[16] They are economically and culturally powerful, framing debate about future landscapes, and shaping landscapes themselves through their business decisions about forestry, wind turbine infrastructure, deer and game bird shooting, and other enterprises.

There is a visceral opposition to conservation organisations by residents (on the part of both rich and poor) in many parts of rural Scotland.[17] This applies particularly to Scottish Natural Heritage (which has in many quarters failed, despite heroic efforts, to live down completely the opprobrium attached to its predecessor, the Nature Conservancy Council). It also applies to the RSPB, and sometimes to the National Trust. All of these organisations are sometimes portrayed as elitist out-of-touch urban organisations from Edinburgh.[18] One interviewee told me that their main problem when meeting farmers was to convince them they were not from SNH or the RSPB: "the first thing they say is "who are you, I've never heard of you, who's been on my land, I didn't know about this", luckily though, 'cause I wasn't from SNH and RSPB [I could avoid] all the tirade of abuse you'd probably get about conservation."

Doing it differently: Scottish thinking about conservation is not joined at the hip with that south of the border: it has increasingly forged its own path in thinking about and delivering conservation. Thus Scotland acquired National Parks in 2002, half a century after they were created in the English uplands and Snowdonia. The Lawton report was a review of England's wildlife sites, and the White paper that to some extent picked up Lawton's challenge was for England, not Scotland. While some non-governmental organisations (and their conservation schemes) reach across the border (the RSPB's 'Futurescapes', the Wildlife Trusts's 'Living Landscapes' or Butterfly Conservation's 'Landscape Target Areas'), there are different NGO players in Scotland such as the National Trust for Scotland and the John Muir Trust, as well as quite separate government organisations.

Large Scale Conservation in Scotland

Given this background, it is not surprising that thinking in Scotland has been concerned with 'large scale' conservation for some time. One root of this is the interest in woodland forest restoration, particularly the (re-)establishment of Scots pine.[19] The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the Scottish Forestry Strategy both discuss the need for landscape-scale restoration, and native woodland restoration has been an important (sometimes all-important) part of the work of many conservation organisations (such as Trees for Life, Scottish Natural Heritage, National Trust for Scotland, Woodland Trust, RSPB), and also the Forestry Commission. A workshop in 2011 on 'landscape scale ecological restoration' initiated by Forestry Commission Scotland, led to the establishment of a partnership project on Landscape Scale Ecological Restoration (LSER).[20]

Approaches to Large Scale Conservation

As in the Great Britain-wide study of LSCs (see the article by Nick Macgregor and others in this issue of *ECOS*), the LSER project found the definition of 'landscape-scale', like that of 'large', difficult to tie down. It also identified restoration as part of multifunctional forest estates such as Glenfeshie, Glen Affric, Rothiemurchus or Glen Tanar. In other locations, native trees were being planted at a great rate on open land (e.g. Glen Garry): future forests in the making.

Here I distinguish four approaches to large scale conservation in Scotland. These are similar to the categories used in the GB study, but not identical:

- Conservation Estates
- Collaborative Landscapes
- Networks of Reconstruction
- Conservation Zones

Conservation Estates

The most distinctive approach can best be described as *Conservation Estates*. This category comprises single estates of large extent where conservation is the primary or at least a systematically important factor driving land management. Such estates exist in England and Wales (the Knepp estate in Sussex for example, and the Wicken Vision in Cambridgeshire), but they are a minority of large conservation projects: in Scotland they are numerous, and indeed predominate.

The Great Britain study of LSCs reported in this issue, identified a significant number of *Conservation Estates* in Scotland, but probably missed others. The reason for this is that in many estates the importance of conservation is not easy to establish. Several sub-categories exist. First, properties owned by recognised conservation organisations, which might be termed *Heritage Estate Conservation Landscapes*, are easy to identify. Government agencies with such estates include Scottish Natural Heritage (for example the isle of Rum or Creag Meagaidh), and Forestry Commission Scotland (e.g. Loch Katrine). Conservation NGOs owning such estates include the RSPB (e.g. Inversnaid, Abernethy or Forsinard Flows), the National Trust for Scotland (e.g. Mar Lodge, St Kilda, Canna or Ben Lawers), the Woodland Trust (Glen Finglas) or the John Muir Trust (e.g. Sandwood Bay). There are differences in the ways these areas are managed for conservation, for example in how issues of grazing, woodland regeneration, natural beauty and visitor facilities are approached. Thus the LSER report distinguished projects that focus on restoring the 'functions' of forests across landscape units such as catchments, and optimizing the supply of forest benefits (or, inevitably 'services'), and a growing number that focus on areas of peat or other open habitats. However, these and many other sites (proportionately many more than in England) would qualify for most definitions of conservation planning and action over areas of large extent.

Second, it is also relatively easy to identify private estates where the owner has some kind of public commitment to conservation. Such estates might include Glen Tanar (Deeside) or Rothiemurchus or Glenfeshie (Speyside), Corrour (Inverness-

shire) or Alladale (Sutherland). These might be called *Private Estate Conservation Landscapes.* This category is less firm at the edges. Some may have a single owner, others may be owned by a trust (e.g. a family trust), so that the distinction between public and private purposes is less easily established. In most of theses estates, conservation is just part of wider management aims. The value for conservation depends on the combination of management aims: uniform management for sheep, deer, forestry or grouse tends to produce standardised landscapes of very limited conservation interest.

However, here the issue of what is and is not a large conservation area in the Scottish context becomes harder to follow. Conceivably most sporting estates could claim some kind of conservation objective as part of their activities. The logic of this claim takes two forms. First, shooting estates that manage their game for sustainable harvests could claim that they are practicing conservation of a sort. Second, most estates benefit from rural grant payments for forestry, agriculture and public access, and in as much as these support or are consistent with conservation-friendly land management, they could also be interpreted as enabling those estates to be seen as large conservation areas. Against this, single-minded management for grouse or deer (and the desire to maximise bags and maintain high deer numbers) tends to create uniform habitats of limited conservation value. Moreover various aspects of management (grazing, burning, predator and mountain hare control) are controversial. Sometimes only SSSI and SAC designation, and linked Deer Control Orders under Section 7 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, persuade estates to reduce grazing pressure on important sites. Most sporting estates are owned and managed as a lifestyle choice, and management tends to be conservative and show reluctance to innovate.[21] Some might qualify as *Private Estate Conservation Landscapes*. To decide which, would require meeting the owners, agents and managers, and walking the ground.

Collaborative Landscapes

A number of large conservation areas in Scotland (including some Estates) exist as collaborations between several adjacent owners. These *Collaborative Landscapes* may involve a mix of private, non-governmental organisation and government agency landowners. Thus the Great Trossachs Forest[22] is a collaboration between the Forestry Commission (managing land leased by Scottish Water), the Woodland Trust (Glen Finglas) and the RSPB (Inversnaid), under the banner of the Scottish Forest Alliance. Three estates together stretch along the north shore of Loch Katrine in the Trossachs to Loch Lomond. These organisations work together (and with the Loch Lomond National Park) on a programme of native woodland regeneration.

Some Collaborative Landscapes are more complicated. One example is the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape between Ullapool and Lochinver. This vast area includes land owned by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (Ben More Coigach), the Assynt Foundation (Drumrunie and Glencanisp), the Culag Community Woodland Trust (Culag Wood), John Muir Trust (Quinag Estate) and the private owner of the Summer Isles. The aims of this collaboration include management to promote woodland restoration and to connect isolated areas of habitat, plus the creation of local employment and training opportunities.

Landscape-scale or Large Scale Conservation in Scotland?

Photo: Bill Adams

Networks of Reconstruction

The Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape comprises a single continuous area, but its work within this area resembles that of the third kind of large conservation area, Networks of Reconstruction. These tend to involve work with large or very large numbers of landowners, with the intention of creating or enhancing connectivity between habitats. Such networks are often the result of a funded project, which may itself have a number of partners. Thus the Clyde and Avon Valley Landscape Partnership, funded by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, is led by the South Lanarkshire Council, but has nine other partners (Scottish National Heritage, Scottish Wildlife Trust, RSPB, North Lanarkshire Council, Clydesdale Community Initiatives, Rural Development Trust, New Lanark Trust, Central Scotland Forest Trust and the Forestry Commission).[23] The partnership's aims are to develop projects that conserve both the natural and the built heritage of the Clyde and Avon valleys (steep oak woodlands, orchards, bridges and paths for example), and to strengthen connections between people and landscape, providing volunteering and learning opportunities in 'heritage skills' and land management practices.

Networks of Reconstruction reflect very different dimension of Scottish landscape history from that of the large Highland estates. The focus here is on the restoration of land transformed by past industrial activity to create a step change in environmental quality, and is therefore focused in the lowland and central belt. Concern for habitats and species is therefore accompanied by a concern for people, sustainable

development and quality of life, health and wellbeing, as well as for built heritage, and community engagement with the landscape.

The key initiative here is the Central Scotland Green Network.[24] This covers a huge area[2] of lowland Scotland (10,000km^2), from Fife and the Lothians to Ayrshire and Inverclyde. The lead partners are Scottish Natural Heritage and the Forestry Commission, although a wide range of national, regional and local partners are involved, the 'usual suspects' as well as others such as the NHS.[25] The vision is holistic: 'By 2050, Central Scotland has been transformed into a place where the environment adds value to the economy and where people's lives are enriched by its quality.' In wildlife conservation terms, the key element of this project is the creation of an integrated habitat network across the whole area[2] in which wildlife corridors link important sites and habitats. A great diversity of projects are being developed, rather in the spirit of letting a thousand flowers bloom.[26]

The idea of ecological networks is becoming established in Scottish planning. The Scottish Government's National Planning Framework identifies as an action 'Develop a National Ecological Network potentially encompassing large strategic habitat restoration projects'.[27] The lead partner in this is Scottish Natural Heritage, but almost every agency has a role. Plans include mapping of 'green network' opportunities in the inner Moray Firth, and work by the RSPB to restore wetlands within its Inner Forth Futurescapes project area and centred on the mudflats of its Skinflats reserve.

Conservation Zones

Scotland also has a number of initiatives that involve attempts to promote conservation over very large areas working with a multiplicity of landowners. These could be described as *Conservation Zones*. The category has much in common with the previous one, but lacks a specific ecological network focus. Such projects tend to be led by one organisation, although often numerous partners are drawn together as participants of some kind. Sometimes these zones are centred on an existing reserve – in other cases these initiatives involve attempts to encourage or support landowners to manage land in particular ways. Many *Conservation Zones* are led by non governmental organisations, for example the RSPB Futurescapes[28] such as Machair (the length of Na h-Eileanan Siar), Caledonian Forest (Speyside) or the Inner Forth. The Butterfly Conservation 'Landscape Target Areas' (described by Nigel Bourn and colleagues elsewhere in this issue) and the Scottish Wildlife Trust's Cumbernauld Living Landscape also fits this category. So too might the native forest restoration work of Trees for Life in Glen Affric.[29] Some *Conservation Zones* are led by government organisations, for example the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative, led by Highland Regional Council and the Forestry Commission.[30]

A different form of Conservation Zone in Scotland involves the spatial targeting of grants under the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP). SRDP schemes include the Habitats Scheme, the Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme, Forestry Commission Challenge Funds and the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme. It may seem far-fetched to see these as large scale conservation initiatives, but

they do support conservation-friendly land management within specific zones, with particular conservation objectives for each target area. Indeed, one could see National Scenic Areas and National Parks in the same light, as attempts by government to deliver conservation outcome by incentivising and regulating landowners.

Making Large Scale Conservation Work

So, Scotland, like England and Wales, has a rich (and rather confusing) diversity of large conservation initiatives. Some are long established (such as Conservation Estates), some are more recent (Collaborative Landscapes and Networks of Reconstruction). Some aspects are similar to those in England, others (like the number and variety of estates) somewhat different. None can be described as a response to the Lawton report (which has less currency than in England and Wales): if anything, the report's authors took inspiration from practical action on the ground in charting a new direction for UK conservation.

At the same time, there are many examples in Scotland for those enthusiastic about the Lawton report to study for insights into how to make large scale conservation happen. Talking to project managers about the things they are trying to do, and the ways they work with partner organisations, and partner landowners, several things become clear.

First, no two projects are the same. In this article, I have outlined some 'types' of initiatives, but there are overlaps between categories, different ways to cut the cake, and numerous projects not mentioned. Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, all project work in their own way. Individuals make a difference, particularly in providing vision, leadership and energy within lead organisations and partners. Yet initiatives develop organically, building on predecessors and often on long-standing relationships among partners and in the local area.

Second, projects therefore take time to develop. Genuine partnerships cannot be built quickly, for they demand trust, which is built through personal relationships. Conservation success therefore favours a familiar face, people who are known in and members of a local community. As one interviewee said "they're not too keen on a, you know, conservation body coming in to give them advice". Word of mouth and reputation count for a great deal as project areas increase. Continuity of employment is an issue, for it allows conservation staff to become known and trusted. Short-term project funding is the enemy of continuity, and a key skill for a large conservation project manager is the capacity to negotiate transitions between big lumps of funding while maintaining continuity on the ground.

Third, funding is near the top of every project manager's list of challenges. Many of these large conservation initiatives are kept going by public funds, whether in the form of grants to enable conservation organisations to employ staff or increase their capacity to reach out to landowners, or in the availability of funds for landowners themselves. The future of the Scottish Rural Development Programme is critical to the success of large scale conservation in Scotland. Without external financial support, many large conservation projects will struggle to endure.

Ultimately, the future of large scale conservation in Scotland will, like every other approach, depend on the kind of nature Scottish people want. Without doubt, large scale conservation can play an important role in creating lived-in and diverse landscapes, resilient against the future shocks of climatic and economic change. At the same time, important questions remain. What should we expect large scale conservation to achieve which conservation in smaller areas cannot? What support is needed to enable conservation to compete with other forms of land use, and how do we measure and target the benefits of this support? Who should own large conservation landscapes and who will pay for their conservation? Such questions remain wide open.

References

1. Lawton J H, Brotherton P N M, Brown V K, Elphick C, Fitter A H, Forshaw J Haddow R,W, Hilborne S, Leafe R, N, Mace G M, Southgate M P, Sutherland W J, Tew T E, Varley J and Wynne G R (2010) *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to DEFRA
2. Hobbs, R. (2009) 'Woodland restoration in Scotland: Ecology, history, culture, economics, politics and change', *Journal of Environmental Management* 90: 2857-65 (p. 2862).
3. The Scottish Government (2012) *A Consultation on the 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity,* The Scottish Government, Edinburgh (http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/07/5241/0)
4. The Scottish Government (2011) *Getting The Best From Our Land: a guide to Scotland's first land use strategy,* The Scottish Government, Edinburgh (www.scotland.gov.uk)
5. This article draws on a project funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, but expresses my own personal opinions. I am grateful to Lindsey Sandbrook, Ian Hodge, Phil Baarda, Chris Hill and Nick Macgregor, and all those who agreed to be interviewed.
6. Macgregor, N.A., Adams, W.M., Hill, C. Eigenbrod, F. and Osborne P.E. (2013) 'Reflections on studying large conservation initiatives in Great Britain', *ECOS* 33(3-4)
7. For an excellent account see Warren, C.R. (2009) *Managing Scotland's Environment*, Edinburgh University Press
8. http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/
9. McIntosh, A., (2001) *Soil and Soul: People versus corporate power*, Aurum Press, London.
10. Henderson, Alexandra (2012) 'Scottish land reform: a lost opportunity for community ownership?', *ECOS* 33(1): 21-26.
11. Warren, C.R. (2009) *Managing Scotland's Environment*, Edinburgh University Press
12. Toogood, M. (1995) Representing ecology and highland tradition, *Area* 27: 102-109
13. Fraser MacDonald (1998) 'Viewing Highland Scotland: ideology, representation and the 'natural heritage', *Area* 30: 237-244.
14. Lorimer, Hayden (2000) 'Guns, Game and the Grandee: The Cultural Politics of *Deerstalking* in the Scottish Highlands.' *Ecumene* 2000 7:403-31.
15. Wightman, A. (1996) *Who owns Scotland*? Canongate, Edinburgh; See also: http://www.whoownsscotland.org.uk/index.php
16. Warren, C.R. (2009) *Managing Scotland's Environment*, Edinburgh University Press
17. MacMillan, D.C., Leitch, K., Wightman, A., and Higgins, P. (2010) 'The Management and Role of Highland Sporting Estates in the Early Twenty-First Century: The Owner's View of a Unique but Contested Form of Land Use', *Scottish Geographical Journal* 126: 24–40
18. For example Ian Mitchell (1999) *Isles of the West: A Hebridean Voyage*, Birlinn, Edinburgh.
19. Hobbs, R. (2009) 'Woodland restoration in Scotland: Ecology, history, culture, economics, politics and change', *Journal of Environmental Management* 90: 2857-65
20. Land Use Consultants (2012) Landscape-scale ecological restoration in Scotland, Land Use Consultants, Glasgow for Forestry Commission Scotland and the Patsy Wood Trust.
21. MacMillan, D.C., Leitch, K., Wightman, A., and Higgins, P. (2010) 'The Management and Role of Highland Sporting Estates in the Early Twenty-First Century: The Owner's View of a Unique but Contested Form of Land Use', *Scottish Geographical Journal* 126: 24–40
22. http://www.scottishforestalliance.org.uk/our-sites/the-great-trossachs-forest
23. http://www.clydeandavonvalley.com/

24. http://www.centralscotlandgreennetwork.org/
25. Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Forest Research, Central Scotland Green Network partners, NHS, Local Authority partnerships, Planning Authorities, Strategic Development Planning Authorities, Scottish Water, British Waterways, RSPB, Central Scotland Forest Trust, Green Network Partnerships and the Environmental Quality Directorate, Rural Directorate, Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate, Climate Change and Planning and Architecture sections of the Scottish Government.
26. http://www.centralscotlandgreennetwork.org/Projects/
27. http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/planning/National-Planning-Policy/npf/EcologicalNetwork
28. http://www.rspb.org.uk/futurescapes/
29. http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/tfl.visi.html
30. http://www.sunartoakwoods.org.uk/soitech/soitech.htm

Bill Adams *teaches about conservation and development in the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge (bill.adams@geog.cam.ac.uk). He blogs at: http://thinkinglikeahuman.wordpress.com/.*

Experienced project officers working closely with landowners and farmers is an important partnership for success, especially to achieve conservation at a wide scale across farms and estates.

Photo: Helen Bibby, Butterfly Conservation