

Repeopling Scotland

Repeopling sees a legitimate place for people and nature in wild areas, as Magnus Davidson explains.

In current ecological restoration discourse, including traditional conservation, rewilding, and reforestation, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of both nature and people. As ecological problems in Scotland tend to be societal, discussion of people and nature together is understandable, if not always desirable. However, much like other elements of the restoration debate, there is a spectrum of opinion on where people fit with nature, especially due to human impact on the environment.

The main proponents of peopled, environmentally restored landscapes are those who have approached the ecological question with a land question background. These are people whose ecological understanding generally comes not from an environmental or conservation background but from an opposition to the landed estate and land inequality, with deer forests and grouse moors as two common examples of associated land use. This ecological understanding has come as a response to the degradation caused by the landed estate and is largely associated with the time period after the Highland Clearances. Ecological degradation is considered a result of the practices of estate owners and managers so negativity is implicit. This is not to say that their aspirations for restoration are completely tied to negative perceptions of the landed class or large-scale private landowners, but they are a key driver. Contrast this with those who approach restoration from a traditional ecological, conservation, or rewilding background, who

generally put nature ahead of the land question but are also in many instances proponents of land reform. For many of these ecologically driven people and organisations, land reform comes second in importance to environmental restoration.

These two almost harmonious proponents of restoration can largely find agreement. That said, the increasing rise of green lairds, corporate off-setters, and rewilding landlords can cause friction over how best to deliver on environmental reform and land reform, and which precedes the other. Another potential point of conflict is the increasing desire from some proponents of peopled landscapes to marry restoration with rewilding or utilise restoration as a driver for rewilding. Peopled landscapes mean many things to different people but stemming depopulation, repopulating, and rewilding should all be considered drivers to delivering this aim. Stemming depopulation is often the first requirement for our rural areas, many of which are suffering from depopulation. Repopulating tends to refer to increasing an existing, albeit diminished, population. Repeopling is more about people going back to areas where the population has reached zero or the population has become too low to be viable.

What is wild?

There are few who argue against repopulating Scotland's rural areas, other than perhaps on the fringe of the rewilding movement. However, rewilding can be considered a more contentious issue, largely as a result of encouraging people back into spaces which have been perceived as being given over to nature. Shifting baseline syndrome—a gradual change in accepted norms regarding our natural environment—has made people accept our ecologically degraded landscapes as normal but



Right, from top: Clearance settlement, Caithness; Native woodland at the abandoned village of Badryrie, protected from sheep and deer by fencing; Victorian Scots pine planted on a clearance settlement in Caithness. Photos: Magnus Davidson.

equally made our depopulated and cleared landscapes seem normal. Many who advocate shifting baseline syndrome ecologically are reluctant to acknowledge it socially. Many of these areas were peopled for thousands of years, being emptied of people for only a couple of hundred, or in many cases just a few decades, say with the loss of the last shepherds. Repeopling is based on the presumption that there is a legitimate place for people and nature in many of these areas now considered wild.

Much of this debate can be found as a result of backlash against the 2014 Wild Land Map, created by what was then Scottish Natural Heritage. Although offering visual landscape protection—an important point to consider—many of these areas are good proxies for core, or potential core, areas for nature, due to the lack of people and infrastructure. Most Wild Land Areas also contain designated environmental sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Areas of Conservation. Debate as to what constitutes wild landscapes and cleared landscapes has moved on from those initial years post-mapping to a more nuanced understanding of the social history of these landscapes. This is largely thanks to local residents, land reform activists, and academics taking an interest in mapping the social history of these landscapes and moving beyond the narrative that ‘Clearance Country’ exists only where relatively well-known and documented clearance settlements are located.

Modern crofting

In 2021, the John Muir Trust Manifesto recognised the role that Wild Land Areas have in both restoration—“revitalised ecosystems, including woodland and peatlands, reversing biodiversity loss and helping Scotland achieve its net zero carbon emissions target before 2045”—as

well as for re peopling—“repopulation of some of Scotland’s abandoned glens”. There are a number of points to be made about the re peopling agenda in Scotland, but particularly the Highlands and Islands. Proponents associate the clearance of people, and subsequent depopulation, with the degradation of environment.

In this case, correlation does equal causation. The eviction and loss of people led to increased herbivory from sheep and then deer, with drainage and ‘management’ for other activities such as agriculture, forestry, or grouse shooting. Clearance grievance this may be, but it also comes from the same root cause in the environmental movement as grievance against the loss of biodiversity across our current landscapes.

As such, the restoration of people to these landscapes does not need to equal further degradation. For re peopling to be appropriate, ecological restoration should be a necessity. Re peopling is not about replicating 18th century subsistence lifestyles. Rather, it pertains to the legitimate place for people and nature in these cultural landscapes, reflecting a 21st century sustainable lifestyle. Technology and remote working will certainly play a role in reducing impact on the land. One



recent example is the suggestion of new woodland crofts to stimulate re peopling for a potential community buy out of Rossal Clearance Village and associated ex-commercial forestry site in Strathnaver, Sutherland. A modern crofting community, with a case to be made to exist beyond the traditional crofting counties, should offer the environmental restoration movement far more than the absentee rewilding landowner. Yet much more work needs to be done to develop this relationship and cultural understanding across both groups.

Explored best in Professor Jim Hunter’s acclaimed book, *On the other side of sorrow: nature and people in the Scottish Highlands*, this issue is not new. Arguments from this 1995 book were repeated in a recent editorial in the *West Highland Free Press*, making it apparent that these concerns remain: “the crofter and the climate change activist should be natural allies—but some recent projects have aroused suspicion among those who owe their living to the land.”

Whence we came

The restoration of language should also be incorporated into our understanding of re peopling and environmental restoration. The seventh principle of rewilding from the International Union of Conservation of Nature states that “rewilding is informed by both

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science and indigenous and local knowledge”. Given the lack of recognised indigenous people in Scotland, a contested issue by some, indigenous language offers much to the debate. The Gaelic language, recognised by the UK and Scottish governments as an indigenous language, provides a literal blueprint for the future potential of a restored, reforested, and rewilded landscape in the Ghàidhealtachd—the Highlands and Islands—arguably the most symbolic area associated with restoration aspiration in Scotland.

Two examples found in the peatlands of Caithness, now known as part of the Flow Country, suggest a more nuanced vision for a reforested and re-peopled landscape than we may expect from an expanse of blanket bog. Fèith Chaorainn Mhòr, the ‘big bog channel of the rowan’, is a name which suggests that this burn was once home to more native woodland than we see today and an opportunity for restoration, facilitated with a reduction in deer numbers. Another, Bad nam Bò, ‘the place of the cows’, contradicts our perception of this area with ideas of wild or wilderness, and showcases a once-peopled landscape in the practice of transhumance.

Above, left to right: Rossal Clearance Village in Sutherland is a potential community buy out site; A longhouse in a Flow Country plantation, Caithness - can we restore the people as we restore the landscape? Photos: Magnus Davidson.

Whether native cattle are desirable is open to debate, yet it is an important point in understanding our human relationship with this landscape and potential human futures.

A just transition

The restoration and re-peopling of landscapes must be considered against Just Transition Principles. The Climate Justice

Alliance sets out eight clear principles for a Just Transition, that is “a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy”. All eight principles are relevant in this context, but particular attention needs paid to ‘equitable redistribution of resources and power’, ‘respecting culture and tradition’, and ‘meaningful work’. These have certainly been considered in this article against crofting, Gaelic, and land reform, but meaningful work requires further understanding in a land use setting.

Meaningful work in a Just Transition has matured in a policy context against the backdrop of our energy transition from oil and gas into renewable energy, but is much less understood for those working in land management. There are also issues, widely misunderstood perhaps by a mostly urban-based Scottish left, on class politics in a rural setting and considering professions such as estate works in a working class context in the move away from extractive economies. The principle requiring ‘regenerative ecological economics’ recognises the role for ecological resilience, reducing resource consumption, and restoring biodiversity. However, it also recognises restoring more traditional ways of life including the re-localisation and democratisation

of small-scale production of food, energy, and other produce. The crofting model once again offers Scotland a future model for working in restored ecological economies.

As a route forward for developing landscapes for nature and people, which have democratic consensus, and against the backdrop of restoration principles such as ‘the three Cs’—the cores, corridors, and carnivores—there needs to be greater multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary working in understanding landscapes from a social, economic, and environmental perspective. Environment first is a justifiable position for many, especially against climate crisis and biodiversity loss, but it does not sit well with many environmentalists in Scotland, and in particular the Highlands and Islands, who have their environmentalism rooted in the land question. Their environmentalism is rooted in a centuries-long desire for social justice. Environmentalism that does not deal with social inequality—as seen with larger restoration-focused private landowners capitalising on, and in some cases exacerbating, land inequality—is not good environmentalism.

Reforestation, restoration, and rewilding are unavoidable for rural Scotland as society moves to avert catastrophic climate change and biodiversity loss. This is a good future and offers a great deal of potential co-benefits for culture, society, and the economy but it requires careful consideration and respect from those facilitating the process. Peopled landscapes can be an additional mention on restoration plans to garner rural support or they can be a genuine approach to delivering a socially-just rural Scotland. As Community Land Scotland advocates, renewing and repopulating rural Scotland is about the legitimate place of people in the landscape. This legitimacy should be ingrained in reforestation, restoring, and rewilding rural Scotland.

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