

A fish swam through it

Les Bates introduces the theme of this year's Reforesting Scotland (RS) Gathering. Watersheds and catchments – of the natural and human kind – are its focus, providing a chance to ponder everything from riparian woodland restoration to community resilience.

I live in what would have been a temperate rainforest below the catchment of the Torrion mountains. The village of Fasag, and the group of six houses known as Fuaran where I live, sit below an old crofting township called Doire na Fuaran ('field of the springs'). There is a constant movement of water from the mountains to the sea. The vast reaches of the mountain Liathach, 'the hoary one', stretch in a big skirt of rocky pinnacles, gullies, boulder slopes and screes above my home. After periods of continuous rainfall the mountainside runs with hundreds of overflowing springs – a seaward-bound movement of white threads unravelling.

Until 1845, three crofting communities formed the township of Doire na Fuaran: Ballnabruich, Ballamian and Ballavoich. But when the landlord refused to renew the tenants' leases, they were forced off the land they had worked and made more fertile to make way for sheep farms. These people also kept cattle.

The theme of this year's Reforesting Scotland Gathering is based around the ideas of catchments and watersheds. Take this scenario, based on the experiences of crofters in Torrion and Applecross: "We planted up a crofter forestry scheme as part of a millennium forest grant aided project. With deer damage issues and changes in local population age, and ongoing change in weather systems, where are we now, a decade on? What are our requirements for further managing the woodland planting and our community harvesting the benefits?"

This might be seen as a watershed situation, having personal, community and environmental consequences. It is one that might occur in a number of locations throughout Scotland, where communities could not have foreseen the ongoing downturn in services and the economy which they face today.

There is a strong community living in the Torrion catchment area and this is evidenced by the recent effort put into gaining £1 million of funding to expand the facilities offered by the Torrion Community Hall. This year's RS Gathering looks at community and ecological watersheds, people and that all important issue the land. It also examines the impact of human activities on freshwater and marine environments, especially in relation to salmon and sea trout. The Gathering also provides space to think about community resilience, and in the case of Reforesting Scotland, organisational resilience.

Salmon and sea trout populations rely on the provision of nutrients to clean and healthy watercourses. After the last ice age, this was provided by a diverse range of prey and predator relationships enabling nutrient release through life and death, and the waste products of life: dung and urine, blood and bone, skin and fur. Greater biodiversity was supported by a well-wooded landscape and the environment was able to sustain greater organism numbers. In an area like Torrion, riparian woodlands along gorges and on lower, wet mountain slopes provided a richer environment for wildlife than found at present. Today sea trout and wild salmon populations are in decline and this is in part due to the lack of nutrients available in watercourses to increase food resources for young salmon and sea trout.

Fragments of Atlantic temperate rainforest exist along the west coast of Scotland in the form of hazel and oak woodlands. Alder is a tree species which occurs in many wet habitats in Torrion and is often found along with willow, birch and ash. On rocky outcrops, where birds have carried seed in defecated droppings, holly and rowan occur. Some bigger expanses of birch, hazel, ash and rowan woodland grow in boulder field areas where they are less prone to grazing pressure from red deer.

In the past, alder, like hazel and oak, provided a valuable woodland resource along the western seaboard of Scotland; this is likely to have been true along the shoreline of Loch Torrion and down to Applecross. In drier habitats, Scots pine still prevails and much work has been done to remove non-native conifer species from the local landscape, along with invasive *Rhododendron ponticum* (on Coulin Estate and by the National Trust for Scotland). But much work remains to be done in other locations to remove *Rhododendron ponticum* and to prevent the spread of other invasive species such as Japanese knotweed, which readily colonises watercourses.

Why is work to restore our riparian habitats so important? Well, a fish swam through it – salmon and sea trout need fresh water and clean marine environments, they cannot swim through polluted waters. Whereas salmon migrate to feed on krill and other marine organisms, sea trout remain close to the lochs and burns of their birth for a considerable time, feeding locally, and therefore they rely on clean freshwater courses.

The salmon is a potent Celtic symbol of mystery, renewal, strength and resilience. I believe this year's Gathering and this edition of the journal will provide much food for thought, and that paths to natural resilience will come through.

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Top: The village of Fasag, Torrion.
Above: The salmon is a Celtic symbol of renewal, strength and resilience.
Photos: Les Bates