



## Balancing act at Mar Lodge

*Can native woodland make a strong come-back on traditional sporting estates? Piers Voysey spoke to ecologist Shaila Rao about balancing woodland regeneration with red deer for sport at Mar Lodge Estate in Deeside.*

**W**hat, in your mind, makes Mar Lodge Estate worthy as a National Trust for Scotland (NTS) property?

It's a magnificent property with a rich and varied natural and cultural heritage. The spectacular landscape has a high quality of wilderness, and encompasses land on the plateau which is among the least managed by man in the UK. This has led to its inclusion within two National Scenic Areas and more recently the Cairngorms National Park. The large span in altitude supports a diverse range of species and habitats, which has led to over 40% of the estate being given European and UK conservation designations (SSSI, SPA, SAC, NNR & Ramsar sites). Its cultural heritage ranges from rare inland Mesolithic finds to the grand Victorian Mar Lodge building. Several of the archaeological sites are scheduled ancient monuments.

What does your job involve on a day-to-day basis?

My job is to provide ecological input to guide the management of the estate. I spend most of my time on the hill or in the woods

monitoring vegetation, trees, birds and so forth. I also contribute to the estate management plan and habitat action plans. Other aspects of my job involve hosting visiting groups to the estate, running a kid's nature club and managing biological records.

The estate covers 29,380 hectares; that's 7% of the total area of the Cairngorms National Park. What is it like being part of the management team responsible for such a large area? It's certainly exciting to be involved in the management of such a large area at the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. However, there is also a sense of responsibility and expectation. Much has been achieved by NTS since its acquisition of Mar Lodge in 1995, but there is still more to do. We have a big task in the coming years to fulfil the objectives set out in the 2011-2016 estate management plan and, through this, demonstrate best practice in upland land management.

The terms of the legacy that helped NTS to acquire the estate stipulated certain priorities for its management. Could you tell us about this?

When NTS accepted the £4 million legacy to purchase the estate, 12 management principles were agreed which we are required to follow. The top three principles are: conservation of the natural and cultural heritage as the primary aim, open and appropriate public access to the estate, and continuing management as a highland sporting estate.

What is the interplay between Mar Lodge as a sporting estate and its priorities for habitat management, in particular woodland regeneration? For management purposes, the estate is split into two zones: the moorland zone, which includes the large area of moorland on the west side of the estate, and the regeneration zone, which comprises the areas with remnant native pinewood (Glens Derry, Luibeg and Quoich). The red deer population on the estate – around 1,650 – is currently compatible with maintaining the moorland habitats in favourable condition. The sporting cull (target of 100 stags) is taken from this moorland zone.

Above: Glen Derry in winter. Photo: Shaila Rao.

We have had to reduce deer numbers in the regeneration zone to allow natural woodland regeneration, so taking a sporting cull from this zone is no longer feasible. However, it is envisaged that, once considerable areas of regeneration have established, the woodland will be able to support a higher red deer population in the future. At this point we may again be able to take a sporting cull from this zone and fully integrate our sporting and woodland conservation objectives.

In addition, we let fishing on the River Dee and continue to manage the moorland for red grouse shooting. Following a muirburn plan agreed with SNH, we hope to see the benefits of this practice while avoiding the detrimental impacts of inappropriate burning.

In 2011, NTS commissioned an independent, evidence-based review of land management at Mar Lodge Estate. How has this fed into the objectives in the new 2012-2016 management plan?

Overall, the primary objectives for the estate have not changed. The deer reduction policy within the regeneration zone is still the main process through which pinewood regeneration will be achieved. However, as a result of the independent review, there is now a greater emphasis on pursuing interventionist management actions to encourage woodland and to allow both sporting and conservation objectives to be met. Examples of this are fencing as part of the Upper Dee Riparian project, ground disturbance to encourage natural regeneration and planting to establish riparian woodland.

That includes building a few more kilometres of strategic fence line? How will this help the estate team manage its priorities on the ground? Yes, as part of the more interventionist management action

described above, we will be erecting a 4km fence at the boundary between the moorland and regeneration zones around the Linn of Dee area. The main purpose of this fence is to protect our sporting resource of red deer stags on the moorland zone. These stags tend to drift into the woodland in the regeneration zone during winter and are likely to be culled. The fence is not required to protect regeneration but is a measure that will allow us to continue meeting both our sporting and conservation objectives.

Even before the review, red deer numbers on the estate were estimated at 1,650, down from the 1995 levels of around 3,350 animals. Had you seen greater woodland regeneration as a result of this reduction in numbers? Yes, there has been a considerable response in woodland regeneration, particularly since the 'zero tolerance' approach to deer management in the regeneration zone was adopted in October 2009. Browsing levels are now low and we are seeing both Scots pine and broadleaves successfully regenerating.

Woodland regeneration had also occurred within some fenced plots. Might these old fences now be removed from within the regeneration zone? Yes, now that trees within fenced plots are beyond browsing risk and unfenced regeneration is progressing well, we feel that a number of fences are now redundant. We intend to remove the majority of existing fences from the regeneration zone within the next year.

Is consideration being given to speeding up the rate of regeneration by any other means? Yes, within the scope of our Forest Plan, which is near completion, we plan to carry out ground disturbance

in some areas of the estate to boost the number of regenerating pine seedlings.

Would you conclude from the NTS experience that it is virtually impossible to see woodland regeneration without fencing in Scotland – not because we cannot get deer numbers low enough, but because there are too many vested interests in maintaining high deer numbers?

We have clearly demonstrated that it is possible to secure natural regeneration in an area dominated by traditional sporting estates. However, this has not been without significant controversy resulting from differing objectives between ourselves and some of our neighbours. It is important to remember that we are also a sporting estate. Personally, I feel that, for landscape-scale woodland restoration to be achieved in Scotland, there must be significant statutory changes in deer management.

Ecologists have long been aware of the need for habitat connectivity. Where are the key links between Mar Lodge and its neighbours in terms of forest connectivity and what critical links, do you think, are missing? The key and critical links missing in terms of forest connectivity are between Mar Lodge and Invercauld Estate within the main Dee valley, and between Mar Lodge and Glen Feshie. The latter link would create a woodland corridor linking up

Below: Young stags on the hill. Opposite, clockwise from left: Regeneration at Carn Crom, Glen Derry; deer stalking on the estate; Shaila in Glen Derry. Photos: Shaila Rao, National Trust for Scotland.



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the Spey and Dee catchments. Our involvement in the Upper Dee Riparian Project will be a start to addressing the link with Glen Feshie. Within the scope of our Forest Plan, over the coming years we hope to be able to work with Invercauld Estate to close the forest gap between the two estates.

**Tell us about the relationship between Mar Lodge Estate and the local community.**

Fifteen permanent staff and 12 seasonal staff work on the estate – all of them live locally. We are working hard to involve the community in the management of the estate – local residents are consulted in

the development of management plans, sit on the Section 7 [deer management] steering group and had the opportunity to contribute to the Independent Review. Many local people walk and cycle on the estate. We also run events such as a kid's nature club and a bonfire night – these are extremely popular with locals.

Among some there is a feeling that the reduction in deer numbers on Mar Lodge has impacted on tourism in Braemar. However, we feel the estate contributes significantly to tourism and local businesses in the village through spend from people staying in the NTS accommodation,

wedding and sporting guests and other visitors to the estate.

**What, for you, are the highlights of working at Mar Lodge Estate?**

I am lucky to be able to live and work on such a beautiful estate. To have eagles, merlins, red squirrels, crossbills and so forth on my doorstep is a privilege. The highlight of the job for me is finally seeing the woodland coming to life again as more and more regeneration becomes apparent.

**[www.marlodgeestate.org.uk](http://www.marlodgeestate.org.uk)**

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