

Poachers turned gamekeepers

- The Assynt buyout



Who owns this landscape?
The millionaire who bought it or
the poacher staggering downhill in the early morning
with a deer on his back?

So asked Norman MacCaig, in his classic poem, 'A man in Assynt'. The answer to his question has just changed and now, for the first time in centuries, local people can stalk the Assynt mountains for deer without fear of reprisals.

The community of Assynt, in north-west Sutherland, now owns four of Scotland's most iconic mountains: Suilven, Canisp, Cul Mor and Cul Beg. Community ownership is seen by the new stewards as an outstanding opportunity to try to reverse decades, even centuries, of ecologically destructive deer management and to promote woodland restoration on the highland estate, shifting the emphasis from sporting values towards more environmentally and socially sensitive aims.

The buy-out

The land purchased by Assynt Foundation, the community body established for the purpose, consists of two adjacent estates, Drumrunie and Glencanisp, a total of 18,400 hectares, together with the 'big house', Glencanisp Lodge. The properties

were put on the market by the previous owners, the Vestey family, in August 2004, and the local community immediately began the process of registering an interest under the terms of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act.

On 18 March 2005, Assynt Foundation was granted the right to buy and had until 3 June 2005 to raise the valuation price of £2.9 million. With the help of local people, the Scottish Land Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage, the John Muir Trust and the Tubney Trust, the fundraising campaign was successful and on 14 June, the first anniversary of the Land Reform Act coming into force, Assynt Foundation took ownership of four of the Assynt mountains.

The land

The land is predominantly wet, with about 20 per cent of the area covered by lochs and burns and a further 45 per cent or so bog. What isn't wet is mostly high ground, either scree or heath, but about five per cent, an estimated 750 hectares, is remnant woodland. Ecologists designate

the woods as upland oakwood, although hardly an oak remains as a result of centuries of burning and grazing as pasture for sheep and deer. The trees that remain are mostly downy birch, with some rowan and willow and the odd alder, holly and aspen.

These remnant woods, however, are highly significant. They form part of an assemblage of habitats and species of European, UK and local importance, within a magnificent landscape that is geologically so impressive it has just been designated a European Geopark. This adds to the area's flush of environmental designations (which include Special Protected Area, Special Area of Conservation, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Geological Conservation Review Site and National Scenic Area); the only accolade missing is National Nature Reserve (NNR), and this is because the Inverpolly NNR, of which Drumrunie formed a major part, was de-declared in 2004, due to the damage caused to the vegetation by overgrazing by red deer and burning over an extensive number of years.

The land

As well as the Drumrunie woodland remnants, some small sections of which are protected by deer exclosures, there are also some big patches of woodland on the south bank of Loch Assynt, now incorporated into a woodland regeneration scheme and protected by a huge fence. There are also policy woodlands (i.e. improved lands surrounding a country house) and a small area of exotic conifer plantation, wind-blown and decrepit, near to the lodge.

The plan

Without doubt the major threat to the woodland is deer, with a current density of around eight to ten animals per square kilometre, more than twice the Deer Commission Scotland's (DCS)

recommended maximum density of five and much greater than the number required to enable vegetation to regenerate. Due to the damage caused, Section 7 of the Red Deer Act has been invoked, which requires that the landowner and the DCS try to reach agreement on how to reduce the negative impact. If agreement cannot be reached, the dreaded Section 8 can be used, under the terms of which the DCS can organise a cull and then bill the landowner for the expense. Assynt Foundation, however, has been fully willing to negotiate and agreement has been reached on an aim to reduce deer numbers by 75 per cent over the next two years, reducing the density on Drumrunie to two animals per square kilometre.

Less than three months after taking ownership the cull was underway, with teams of stalkers making the most of the stag season. Shooting of hinds will continue until February and efforts will be redoubled next year. The ultimate objective is not, however, to achieve a particular number of deer, but rather to encourage natural regeneration of the woods and other vegetation types. The success of the cull will be determined by detailed monitoring rather than deer counts and the Foundation is seeking funding to employ ranger-monitors to measure the response of saplings and heather to the reduced grazing pressure.

Economic impacts

It is no secret that the number of stags on the hills and salmon in the rivers is a major factor in the capital values of Highland estates. One impact of wielding Section 7 of the Red Deer Act, and reducing deer densities, is therefore to bring about a potentially major reduction

in capital value of the land. Assynt Foundation's decision to make a drastic reduction in deer numbers will make a big dint in the land value, but this is not a problem because the community wants to own the land for posterity and does not intend it ever to go on the market again. This demonstrates one of the most important arguments for community



ownership: that the tradeable commodity value of land ceases to take precedence over its other social and environmental values.

Already economic and employment benefits are emerging from Assynt Foundation's ownership of the land. It is using the cull as an opportunity to create new stalking enterprises, both by local entrepreneurs and by a company called Assynt.biz, which it has set up to create new business opportunities based on the land and the lodge. In addition, the community's willingness to negotiate with government agencies is enabling grants to be brought in for management to enhance conservation and amenity value. Local people are being employed as ranger-monitors, guides and other service providers for stalkers and to develop the business ideas. It is early days, but already looks promising.

Ecological impact

It is too early to say how the woods will respond to the new management regime. Some people question whether the cull will have the desired effect, as deer mobility may mean that they continue to use the woods for shelter and even in smaller numbers continue to cause damage. The impact on the deer herd itself should be to improve the remaining animals' health and strength, as the cull aims to take the weakest animals, the reverse of 'trophy' hunting in which the biggest-antlered stags are the target.

As the land provides a world-class hunting experience, with its stunning views and exciting stalks, the stalking is viewed by many as an important economic asset. The challenge will be to

balance the land uses of hunting and conservation in the long term.

Long-term vision

One of the approaches Assynt Foundation intends to take to balance these different values is zoning of the land. For example, the primary use of Drumrunie will be for its conservation value, while the primary use of other parts of the estate will be assigned to activities like hunting. Areas will also be set aside for crofting, housing and other social developments. The Foundation is also working to develop co-operation over deer management with neighbouring land-owners including Assynt Crofters Trust and Culag Community Woodland

Trust (and possibly also the John Muir Trust, which is seeking to buy Quinag, the next mountain to the north) and with other community bodies over development and use of the woodland, timber and eco-tourism resources.

There are those in the community who voted 'no' to the buy-out, and who still have concerns about the Foundation's capacity to manage the land or its ability to deliver significant progress to the area. Their voices are important sources of caution in decision-making and of doubts and concerns that need to be considered carefully. However, as other communities have found, and as Assynt has already experienced twice before, the purchase of land by the community opens up a plethora of new opportunities, unleashes a burst of creative and entrepreneurial energy and, like tapping into a spring, creates a new stream of economic, social and environmental benefits. MacCaig would, I am sure, be proud to see optimism flooding what he called 'the sheltered glens' and the people 'coming, at last, into their own again.'

Mandy Haggith is a researcher and writer based in Assynt. After spending a decade trying to work out how artificial intelligence could save the world, and eventually discovering it can't, she has spent the last ten years campaigning in support of people in forests. She recently published a collection of poems, called Letting light in, which is being sold in aid of Assynt Foundation, helping them to bring the Assynt mountains into community ownership and management. Copies can be obtained for £5 by emailing hag@worldforests.org or writing to 95 Achmelvich, Lochinver, IV27 4JB.