

## Community efforts vital in fight to save the natural world

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The debate continues over wealthy 'green lairds' buying land and receiving public money for environmental projects, used to offset harmful carbon emissions from their normal commercial activities.

But there is now an increasing national and international recognition of the vital role local communities must play if we are to tackle the global challenges of climate change and protecting and enhancing our precious biodiversity, according to Community Land Scotland.

It says progress is already being made by communities. From the rugged landscape of Harris, from where you can look out past golden eagles in flight to see St Kilda in the distance; to the patch of woodland which is a remaining stronghold for the endangered tree sparrow, despite overlooking busy Glasgow airport; and the work being done on the precious wetland marshes less than 20 miles from Selkirk – people are alive to what's at stake.

Community Land Scotland chair Ailsa Raeburn says that too often it is assumed when discussing how to tackle the environmental crisis, that only massive projects covering thousands of acres will suffice:

"It is probably because of the scale of the challenge we are facing, but it ignores what has already been happening on the ground where communities have taken control of their local land. From the hydro scheme in Knoydart to the wind turbines on Gigha, the green energy grid on Eigg and Langholm's Tarras Valley Nature Reserve, they have been well ahead of the curve.

"It is because when local residents decide to buy their land it has never been about carbon credits or green washing. It is about retaining population and protecting the environment that makes their place special to them. They aren't driven by the same financial motivations as many private landowners who see the nature and climate crises as a way to increase the value of their asset "

She said the importance of the environmental work communities were doing and the potential to achieve far more, was now being recognised by world bodies.

Community Land Scotland points to the landmark agreement struck by the UN Biodiversity Conference COP15 in Montreal in December. Crucially for the first time it accepted that the indigenous communities of the world are crucial to safeguarding nature. Their lands contain 80% of the planet's remaining plant and animal species, despite having only 5% of the population.

Meanwhile at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) at Interlaken in Switzerland last month, which agreed a 'survival guide' to avoid climate disaster, IPCC chair Hoesung Lee stressed: "Transformational changes are more likely to succeed where there is trust, where everyone works together to prioritise risk reduction, and where benefits and burdens are shared equitably" - words which could have been taken directly from the Scottish Government's own commitment to a 'just transition' away from oil and gas.



Scottish Ministers created the Just Transition Commission to guide, oversee and scrutinise progress towards a carbon net zero economy, “in a way that delivers fairness and tackles inequality and injustice”. In its last report the commission highlighted the role local communities should play:

“Community ownership of environmentally beneficial land use activities can deliver the strongest alignment with just transition and community wealth building principles, thanks to being rooted in place; generating positive local multiplier effects; embedding collaboration into decision making; and delivering inclusive, well-paid jobs.”

It contrasted this to the concentration of private landownership in huge estates, which it saw as hurdles to the ‘just transition’ the Scottish Government is seeking. Community leaders themselves underline their clear commitment to responsible management of the natural world.

Calum MacKay, chair of the North Harris Trust, which has embarked on a programme of woodland regeneration and planting, said: “It would be crazy trying to encourage young people to live in the rural environment, if you weren’t willing to protect it.”

Maggie Morrison, Senior Development Officer for the Inchinnan Development Trust, which saved a precious local woodland (home to threatened bird species) from becoming house sites, is equally clear: “If we don’t look after the wood and the natural life it supports, nobody will.”

Meanwhile the Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company (EYCDC) is involved in a major wetland restoration project, which is seeing wildlife prospering in Ettrick Marshes. Project manager Vicky Davidson said: “It’s a different feeling. Now local people can act together to improve their own local environment. Access to Ettrick Marshes was closed for years until the community gained ownership.”

## **A Tale of Three Communities.**

### North Harris

At nearly 65,000 acres the estate the North Harris Trust (Urras Ceann a Tuath na Hearadh) manages is large, but it is not in the hands of one man or one corporate body. Since 2003 and it has been owned by the community, which provides the volunteers to serve on its board of directors.

It embraces sandy beaches and machair, blanket bog and lochans, crofts and mountains, as well as the streets of the island’s main settlement Tarbert. It is home to a biodiversity treasure chest, from pearl mussels to mosses, golden plover to merlin, mountain hares to otters, red deer and one of the highest densities of golden eagles in Europe.

Like of most of the Outer Hebrides, however, Harris has comparatively few trees. The NHT is addressing that. There is a project to regenerate the scraps of rowan, aspen, holly and willow which have managed to survive. Seeds are being collected to allow the planting of these native species in other suitable areas. In the future North Harris should be able to boast a network of woodland habitats.

NHT chair Calum Mackay said: “We hope the generations to come will see a different North Harris, when the trees start to grow. Much of our land is not suitable for food production but is for trees. It is just one of the environmental measures we are taking, which help our wildlife. We try to be vigilant in observing



any changes. Regular monitoring of the natural environment takes place in collaboration with agencies such as Nature Scot to ensure that activities undertaken are not detrimental to the natural balance of nature.

“You see the whole idea of the buyout has been about ownership. This puts a particular responsibility on the local people to maintain the natural environment of where they live. It would be crazy not to. It would be crazy trying to encourage young people to live in the rural environment, if you weren’t willing to protect it.

“It is the local residents who know what is happening on their own doorsteps, and potentially come up with solutions to any issues. Many of us are crofters, and it is part of our way of life. But we all know the history of the place, in a way that somebody being parachuted in doesn’t. We are, however, open to new ideas, fresh thinking. We work closely with the wildland charity the John Muir Trust on developing policy and exchanging information, although they do not have a presence here.”

### Inchinnan

It is all so different down south in Renfrewshire. The Inchinnan Development Trust (IDT) was formed specifically to take ownership of an area of woodland which had been growing for well over a century and a half.

Teucheen Wood stretches to 14.45 acres on a hill above Glasgow Airport. In May 2019 it was put up for sale. Villagers were shocked, fearing it would be bought for yet another housing development. So the local Inchinnan Community Council acted and formed IDT to pursue a community purchase of the wood. This was completed successfully in December 2021.

Maggie Morrison, IDT Senior Development Officer remembers well when the news about Teucheen Wood broke:

“I am not from the village, but my husband is as is his mother. So, our son is fourth generation Inchinnan. His granny played in these woods. Although there was no official path, the locals all knew how to get into them through the land owned by the Blythswood Estate.

“Some of the locals saw the proposed sale on an auction website and got in touch with me. I had just become secretary of the community council. As the word of the sale spread amongst the villagers (1,874), so did the anger. A determination grew that we had to save Teucheen Wood. Living beside Glasgow airport, its trees are Inchinnan’s lungs, almost literally. Without them our air quality would be much poorer because of the airport. The air monitors in the village tell us that.

“But it was about more than that. An important battle was fought there over nearly 900 years ago. As long as anyone can remember the chestnut, sycamore, beech and oak that have been growing there since 1860s have been a precious part of the village’s identity. These trees give shelter to precious wildlife.

“Eight out of 10 of our most endangered bird species are to be found in the wood. There are bullfinch and great spotted woodpeckers. Below them roe deer, foxes, voles, newts, are at home. Just last week our wildlife expert came across a stoat. The first seen here for a long time.

“Volunteers are working hard. We have made the wood more accessible. More pieces of land are being bought to link up with Teucheen Wood and increase the wildlife habitats, sustaining the biodiversity.



These won't be for people, but we will create positions where the birds can be watched from a distance. We have a big campaign to keep dogs on leads. If we don't look after the wood and the natural life it supports, nobody will."

### Ettrick and Yarrow.

A fair distance southeast of Inchinnan and 17 miles from the nearest town Selkirk, lies a huge wetland restoration project now recognised throughout the UK as protecting a truly outstanding example of a floodplain forest. It is 130 acres teeming with life, in marked contrast to the conifer plantations which stretch across the hills above.

The native species of trees around the edge of the Ettrick Marshes' reeds and rushes all provide vital habitats. Meanwhile if the River Ettrick floods, the marshes slow the flow of the excess water reducing the flood risk downstream, exactly as nature intended.

After a period of neglect, the public can once again walk through the marshes and see the extraordinary wealth of biodiversity the flood plain supports, from: bilberry and bog mosses; to otters and red squirrels; ospreys to rare butterflies. Not to mention almost 80 different species of small birds.

Access to the marshes has been restored by the Ettrick & Yarrow Community Development Company (EYCDC).

In May 2021 with support from South of Scotland Enterprise, the EYCDC acquired the site from Forestry and Land Scotland. It had already been at the centre of one of the earliest attempts at rewilding part of Scotland's landscape, over 20 years ago. It wasn't by a multi-millionaire. It was a charity, the Borders Forest Trust which was established to restore native woodland to Southern Scotland, where little remained.

The trust made strides in restoring the floodplain habitats. It removed the non-native Sitka spruce, provided paths and boardwalks for access, and hides to watch the wildlife. But it only leased the land, and over the years trees were blown over and blocked access. Repairs and other upgrading work was needed. The Ettrick & Yarrow Community Development Company (EYCDC) stepped forward.

It had been established in 2013 because of deep local concern over the changing land use and demographics in the Ettrick and Yarrow valleys. Sheep farms were being lost to commercial forestry. Houses prices were rising and local school rolls were falling, a familiar tale across rural Scotland.

The development trust was determined to act. Three years ago it bought an old farm steading which it has now transformed into five affordable houses and seven energy efficient workshops.

But one of its first acts was to establish a 7mile circular walk around the celebrated St Mary's Loch. That was in 2015. Four years later it reopened the Captain's Road. It was an ancient hill route linking the upper reaches of the Ettrick and Yarrow valleys, which had become blocked by forestry planting in the 1970s. With board members all living in the community, the EYCDC was able to respond to local wishes to have these old connecting paths restored.

With the routes and the marshes, there was also a recognition that nobody else was going to do it if the community didn't act for itself. Project manager Vicky Davidson said: "It's a different feeling. Now local people can act together to improve their own local environment. Access to Ettrick Marshes was closed for



years until the community gained ownership. Now I would say it has brought the community together as well as providing local employment.”

In addition to the Ettrick Marshes, the community acquired a ten acre stand of commercial timber in the adjacent Gamescleuch Forest, as part of the asset transfer deal. It will be felled this year and replanted with native broadleaved trees. Forestry and Land Scotland has committed to replanting the stand above with oak and birch so the woodland around the marshes in future will extend up the hillside.

Links to the case studies

- [Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company](#)
- [North Harris Trust](#)
- [Inchinnan Development Trust](#)

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Photographs attached:

1. Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company (EYCDC) – photo of Ettrick Marshes – photo credit: EYCDC
2. North Harris Trust – photo of Machair – photo credit: Laurie Campbell
3. Inchinnan Development Trust volunteers – photo credit: Inchinnan Development Trust

