Natural Capital
Community Partnerships



Assynt Foundation

October 2026



Credit: Assynt Foundation

This case study explores how the Assynt Foundation, a community landowner, has pioneered new approaches to natural capital. Through nature restoration, carbon markets and long-term partnerships, the Foundation has created opportunities for both the environment and the local community.

The case study examines the Foundation's journey, the challenges its members have faced, the opportunities they have created, and the lessons their experience offers to other communities looking to make the most of their natural assets.

> "From my perspective, revenue from carbon sequestration has been a game changer and lifeline for the Assynt Foundation."
>
> **— Assynt resident**

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01 / Context and Background

Assynt Foundation land was acquired through a community buyout in 2005 and comprises approximately 18,000 hectares of mountain, moorland, and water, with little agricultural activity. The Foundation operates as a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity, placing community governance at the centre of decision-making.

Historically, income was generated through traditional lodge letting and a deer stalking operation. The hope was to create a community run highland deer stalking estate model. But limited profits, and the cost of lodge renovation and interest payments led to difficult financial conditions.

Early efforts to diversify income through wind and hydro power projects were unsuccessful. By 2017, the organisation was facing a severe financial shortfall and was informed that grant funding would no longer be available, prompting a fundamental shift in approach to land management and income generation. Other Foundation and community activities had demonstrated capacity and given some confidence. The Coigach/Assynt Living Landscape project and other endeavours led to significant achievements, such as the arts studio, barn, pathways, deer larder and relationship with the Woodland Trust, creating an atmosphere of collaboration and facilitating cross-organisational working.

From 2019 onwards, the Foundation began to reposition itself around natural capital opportunities, particularly woodland creation and peatland restoration, as a route to long-term financial sustainability and environmental enhancement.



Credit: Woodland Trust

18,000 ha.
Assynt estate

2005
Community Buyout

2019
Natural Capital

02 / Project Goals

The core goal has been to establish sustainable, long-term income from the estate while restoring and enhancing the natural environment and delivering community benefit.

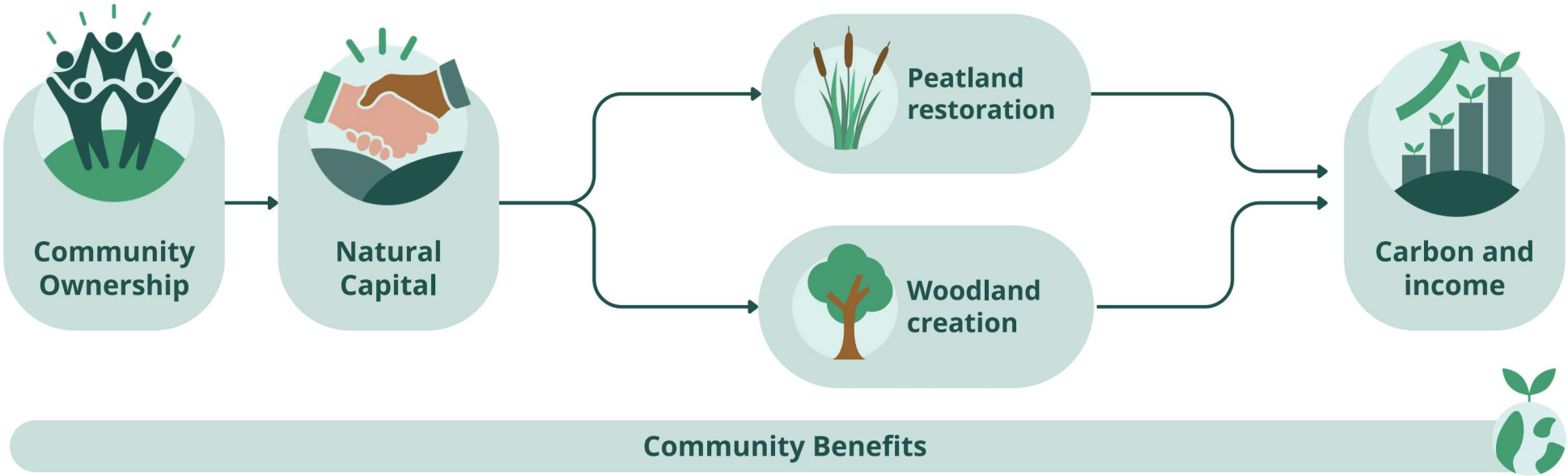
In practice, this has meant developing revenue-generating nature-based projects that reduce reliance on grants, support financial resilience, and enable reinvestment into community priorities. A key principle has been retaining community control over land use while increasing the productivity and ecological value of the estate.

Delivery has focused on native woodland creation and peatland restoration at scale, alongside generating verified carbon units through frameworks such as the UK Woodland Carbon Code and Peatland Code.

These objectives align with wider policy priorities in Scotland around net zero, biodiversity restoration and community wealth building, while also demonstrating how community-owned land can attract and deploy private investment into natural capital.



Credit: Karoline James-Griffiths / Woodland Trust Media Library



03 / Actions Taken

Assynt Foundation's approach to natural capital has developed around two main strands: partnership-led woodland creation and in-house peatland restoration.

Woodland Creation Partnership

Woodland creation has been delivered through a long-term partnership with the Woodland Trust. Recognising the limits of internal capacity, the Foundation worked with the Woodland Trust to access technical expertise, funding and market connections.

Native woodland has been established across multiple sites, with the land for the planting sites leased to the Woodland Trust, who lead on delivery and grant funding applications. Carbon revenues are shared, with early returns guaranteed to provide a degree of financial certainty.

This partnership has since evolved into a more structured, landscape-scale model involving private investment. Through a 30-year agreement with the Woodland Trust, backed with carbon funding by Aviva, woodland creation and wider habitat restoration are being delivered across the Glencanisp and Drumrunie estates.

The programme includes the creation of 2,000 to 2,500 acres of new native woodland in the first phase, alongside restoration of peatlands, riparian areas and fragments of Atlantic rainforest, forming part of a wider 30-year landscape recovery plan.



Credit: Woodland Trust

2005 Community buyout

2017 Financial shortfall

2019 Natural capital approach

2020+ Woodland partnership

2021+ Peatland restoration

30 years Landscape recovery plan

2,000-2,500 acres

Native woodland first phase

03 / Actions Taken

Peatland Restoration and Commercial Restructuring

In parallel, the Foundation has developed its own peatland restoration projects. Supported by Peatland Action and working with specialist intermediaries such as Forest Carbon, this strand has allowed the organisation to take a more direct role in delivery while accessing carbon markets.

The Cùl Mòr project provides a clear example. Covering approximately 75 to 90 hectares within a nationally designated landscape, restoration works included ditch blocking, hag re-profiling and re-vegetation to raise the water table and enable peat-forming vegetation to recover. The project is expected to avoid around 11,900 tonnes of carbon emissions over its lifetime while also improving water quality and biodiversity.

Importantly, partners such as Forest Carbon supported the Foundation not only with technical design and Peatland Code validation, but also with carbon modelling, upfront finance and access to buyers. This enabled early cashflow through the sale of Pending Issuance Units, helping to bridge funding gaps during project development.

Alongside these nature-based activities, the Foundation has also restructured its existing estate operations. The lodge will be leased to an external hotel operator, providing a stable and predictable income stream that complements the longer-term returns from natural capital.



Credit: Assynt Foundation

75 - 90 ha

Peatland restored

11,900 t

Carbon emissions avoided (Cùl Mòr)

Estate Restructure

Lodge is being leased for stable revenue stream

04 / Community Inclusion and Benefit



Credit: Karoline James-Griffiths / Woodland Trust Media Library

Community governance has remained central throughout the process with the Woodland Trust. Both the in principle heads of agreement and the later fully worked up South Assynt Collaboration Agreement were submitted to members in general meetings for scrutiny and approval. All major decisions required a high level of members approval, ensuring strong local oversight and buy-in. Management of the project is through a deadlocked board, ensuring the Foundation retains a veto.

This approach has helped maintain legitimacy and trust, although it has required careful communication around risk, timescales and expected returns, particularly in relation to carbon markets and private investment.

The collaboration is already delivering a range of tangible benefits. Woodland has created work for local contractors, while delivery partners have established a local operational presence. A lack of jobs, particularly winter work is a key local issue and this last winter has seen

...half a dozen or so members of the local community working on the land locally...

rather than having to work elsewhere. This is crucial for the local community, maintaining a critical mass of people for socialising and helping keep businesses running at the quiet time of year.

Beyond employment, there is a greater sense of connection, ownership and investment, particularly from those working on the land regularly.

The shift towards natural capital is strengthening the Foundation's ability to invest in wider community priorities, including a planned housing and infrastructure development between Lochinver and Glencanisp.

It is also building confidence within the community that new models of land use can deliver both environmental and economic outcomes.

05 / Outcomes and Evidence

Environmental Outcome

The environmental outcomes are both immediate and long term. Native woodland creation is expanding habitat networks and supporting biodiversity, including the restoration of rare Atlantic rainforest. Peatland restoration is reversing degradation in internationally important habitats, improving hydrology and enabling carbon to be stored rather than released.

At project level, the Cùl Mòr peatland scheme alone is expected to prevent around 11,900 tonnes of carbon emissions over its lifetime, while also delivering wider benefits such as improved water quality, flood regulation and habitat recovery. At landscape scale, the wider collaboration is restoring thousands of acres of habitat and creating a more resilient mosaic of woodland, peatland and open ground. This reflects a shift towards integrated land management rather than single habitat interventions.

Economic and Social outcome

Carbon generation is central to the model. Woodland creation under the Aviva-backed partnership is expected to generate substantial long-term income, with projected returns to the Foundation in the region of £2 million to £2.5 million depending on performance over the 30 year life of individual plantings. This sits alongside peatland projects that are already demonstrating strong commercial potential.

Social and economic outcomes are also significant. The model is designed to create a long-term financial reserve that can be reinvested into community priorities, moving away from short-term grant dependency towards sustained income from natural assets, and building up financial capital and a 'rainy day' reserve fund. The increased activity, jobs and initial investments in infrastructure is also beginning to build a closer sense of involvement on the land for some in the local community. The Foundation feels this is important since even though the estate is large, it's separate from the community at Lochinver.

The involvement of private investment demonstrates how corporate capital can, in the right circumstances, be aligned with community ownership and environmental outcomes. In Assynt, this has worked because the community has led the project from the outset, rather than being a consultee, and has retained control over land use decisions.

Community ownership of the land is a critical factor, ensuring that revenues and wider benefits remain local. This example shows what is possible, but it also demonstrates that such models depend on strong local governance, clear community mandate and equitable partnership structures, rather than corporate investment alone.

ENVIRONMENTAL

WOODLANDS
Atlantic Rainforest
Habitat network expansion

PEATLANDS
11,900 t
Lifetime carbon avoided

LANDSCAPE
1,000s Acres
Resilient mosaic habitat

PEATLANDS
Water & Flooding
Hydrology and recovery

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL

WOODLANDS
£2 - £2.5 mil
Projected returns over 30-year lifetime

PEATLANDS
Carbon Yield
Sustained asset income

COMMUNITY
Reserve Fund
Local jobs & investment

OWNERSHIP
Local Control
Community-led decisions



06 / Lessons Learned

Assynt Foundation have been open about the challenges involved, and its experience offers useful lessons for others.

Internal Capacity

A key factor in progressing the work has been internal capacity at Board level. Developing agreements of this scale required detailed scrutiny of legal and commercial terms. In Assynt's case, this was supported by having a board member with a legal background who could work through complex contracts and negotiations, and be a bridge between outside solicitors and the board. Without that level of expertise, it would have been significantly more difficult to reach agreement or to do so with confidence. This demonstrates the importance of access to specialist skills, whether internally or through trusted advisors.

Community Governance

Community governance brings both strength and complexity. Democratic decision-making builds legitimacy but can slow progress and requires ongoing effort to manage expectations and maintain engagement over long timeframes.

Carbon Markets

The Foundation's experience with carbon markets also offers a note of caution. It has been able to generate early revenue through the sale of Pending Issuance Units, which has helped support delivery and bridge funding gaps. However, this has depended on timing, market conditions and access to buyers. It should not be assumed that similar projects will always be able to generate revenue in this way or at the point it is needed.

Timescale

Timescales have also been longer than expected. Developing partnerships, securing approvals and aligning funding took several years. This created pressure on the organisation's finances and required interim solutions to maintain cash flow, including bringing forward carbon sales.

Persistence

Finally, persistence has been critical. Resilience, good leadership and a willingness to adapt have all played an important role in progressing what is a complex and long-term transition.

Credit: Woodland Trust

07 / Next Steps and Future Opportunities

The Foundation is now in a position to build on its progress, with the Aviva-backed partnership providing long-term structure and financial confidence. The 30-year horizon allows for a more strategic approach to land management.

There is clear potential to expand peatland restoration across additional areas of the estate, complementing the woodland programme and further diversifying income streams. Continued engagement with carbon markets and buyers will also be important as projects move from validation to verification. The Foundation is aware that it will need to consider how to use, and benefit from the land long-term, but the lessons learned in the natural capital journey so far have given breathing space, expertise, and capacity from which to move forward.

The model developed in Assynt provides a strong example for other community landowners. It shows how partnerships, blended income streams and community governance can be combined to deliver both financial sustainability and environmental restoration at scale.

From a community perspective, there is a desire to make greater use of the land for local enterprise, community activity and working with natural processes. Potential opportunities include low density cattle grazing, both to produce high-quality local meat and to restore important ecosystem processes such as ground poaching and rough browsing, local firewood production, crafts, and fruit production from the orchard and walled garden. There is also scope to expand recreational and social use of the estate including mountain biking, recreational paths, health walks, and a Men's shed.

LAND & RESOURCE ENTERPRISE



Low-Density Grazing
Local meat production, ground poaching & rough browsing



Local Firewood
Sustainable community timber production



Fruit Production
Orchard & walled garden restoration



Crafts & Enterprise
Local maker spaces & micro-businesses

HEALTH, WELLBEING & RECRECATION



Men's Shed & Bike Group
Mentoring, outdoor skills & youth interaction



Recreational Trails
Mountain biking & path network extension



Health Walks
Community health & outdoor mobility



Community Activities
Social gatherings & local group events



Assynt has relatively limited recreational infrastructure and facilities, and existing activity demonstrates how the estate could provide these. For example, the local trials bike group already uses areas of the Assynt Foundation estate and has developed into a valuable social group, providing opportunities for mentoring new riders, skills development, social interaction, time spent outdoors in woodland and open ground. For NCCP, this highlights an opportunity to support replication where appropriate. This is not a model that will suit every community, as each has its own context, assets and constraints.

However, Assynt provides a strong example of what can be achieved where there is ambition, capability and long-term vision. It demonstrates how a community can deliver large-scale nature restoration while also creating sustainable revenue and reinvesting in local priorities. NCCP can play a role in helping other communities explore what elements of this approach may be relevant to them, while ensuring solutions are tailored to local circumstances.

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Ross Wilson, 'Community Land Scotland', p01
Assynt Foundation, p02, p07
Woodland Trust, p04, p06, p10
'Karoline James-Griffiths / Woodland Trust Media Library' for the open day photos, p05, p08, p12

Learn More

The Natural Capital Community Partnership team can provide advice, resources and tailored support for natural capital projects.

Get in touch
nccp@communitylandscotland.org.uk

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
Scottish Forestry Coilltearachd na h-Alba
South of Scotland Enterprise
HIE Highlands and Islands Enterprise Iomairt na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean
Foundation Scotland Scotland's Community Foundation
The Assynt Foundation
*Fearann Coimhearsnachd na h-Alba | Community Land Scotland
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