

**Name:** Abriachan Forest Trust (AFT)

**Place:** Abriachan, Loch Ness, Highland

**Headline:** Pioneering community forest, restructured from plantation forest with multiple activities providing local employment, adult learning support, skills training, forest enterprises and outdoor education.

**Keywords:** plantation forest restructuring, timber, adult learning, health, volunteering, forest management

**Context:** In response to concerns about the loss of common rights on public land, arising from sale of State forest, Abriachan Forest Trust (AFT) bought five hundred and forty hectares of forest in 1998 for £152,000.

**Original aims:** The Trust's objectives were – to develop the infrastructure, encourage outdoor learning and improve the amenity value for the general public, to increase the area of native species within the forest and to create jobs. A long-term goal is to improve the environmental value of the forest by increasing the age structure and tree species diversity. A 60-year management agreement with SNH is in place.

### **What actually happened as a result and what has been achieved?**

The Trust became one of the first and largest community owners of plantation forest in Scotland, with 540 hectares of mostly conifer forest yielding an annual increment (increase in volume) of 2,200 m<sup>3</sup>. AFT is a well-resourced, motivated organisation that enjoys the active support of most of the local community. The majority of Abriachan's 120 or so residents are members of the forest trust, some 70 adult members. The local and wider public benefits accruing from a change in control/ownership at Abriachan are frankly staggering.

To date, AFT has successfully implemented; a programme of forest management and restructuring (including clear felling and thinning), school and adult education, forest enterprise development (firewood and biomass), and constructed; new access (some 40 km of paths and tracks) a range of forest buildings and structures (forest classroom, workshop, roundhouse, bird hide and many more). Much of the work has been subsidised by the commercial returns from felling and sale of plantation conifers, plus a wide range of other funding sources, including service contracts with NHS and Highland Council Care and Learning.

AFT did not manage to acquire all of the land at Abriachan Forest, which totalled 863 hectares (the Trust secured 540 ha). This was due to a failed Heritage Lottery Fund bid.

The Trust's youth and adult education program has gone far beyond what was envisaged at the outset, and the Trust has won a variety of awards for its woodland management, for contributing to the local tourist industry, and its adult & child health and education work (including mental health and offender rehabilitation).

A proposal to build a bunkhouse in 2002 was shelved due to the scale of the enterprise required to off-set costs and because at that time AFT perceived that this would have competed with other proposed bunkhouse projects locally.

The original and long standing aspiration to provide affordable/social housing has not been realised yet due to the site location and the cost of servicing house plots.

An unexpected outcome is the scale and depth of the social impacts/benefits arising from formal work learning and employability programmes - with adult and youth education, skills for work, mental health support, criminal justice support and volunteering. This pioneering work in developing outdoor woodland learning alongside therapeutic health and well being interventions has equipped the group to broaden its horizons in relation to service provision. Branching Out delivery has been extended across NHS Highland community mental health team areas thanks to leader training and ongoing support from AFT and FCS. The different categories of participants are now planning the development of a woodland craft enterprise.

A reliance on external funding for the health, social and learning programme, and associated support towards employment, may be problematic, with further cuts to funding across Scotland's public services a real prospect, there is a degree of uncertainty as to the longevity of these social schemes. There is an ever-present risk as a result of being over extended – taking on too many things, but this is, in part, offset by the group's drive, its flexible approach, an awareness of suitable partnerships and thus the organisation's sustainability.

### **What is the evidence for these outcomes?**

The physical evidence of forest restructuring, new native woodland planting, access creation and structure building is self-evident. AFT has successfully transformed a regular commercial forestry plantation (1998-60% Lodgepole pine, 2016 – 23% Lodgepole pine) into a multi purpose forest with significant public access (30km) including all ability access, mountain bike tracks (14km), new native woodland creation (>200,000 trees planted), forest classrooms and an award winning programme of education, skills training and health (mental and physical) activities, including John Muir Awards and Branching Out (mental health improvement) training.

The Trust employs two Volunteer co-ordinators, a self-employed forest craftsperson, forest maintenance /deer control contractors, a part time administrator, and 4 (=3FTE) in a learning employability support and recreation team.

AFT has worked in partnership with other community woodlands, with NHS Highland and the local authority to deliver health, employability and skills activities/courses. There is a long list of hard to reach individuals and groups of young people, adults with mental ill-health, Branching Out ( a mental health support initiative) has supported (10 programmes for 10 adults per course), women involved in the criminal justice system supported in an ongoing programme (8), John Muir Awards participants (150), school pupils attending employability courses (10pa).

Some eighteen hundred volunteer days are recorded annually, approximately six hundred pupils per annum take part in sessions of outdoor learning plus small group or individual Forest School sessions for pupils with additional support needs.

Until recently, AFT expertise in social and educational uses of forest has been in demand from organisations in the public sector and from aspirant community land-owning groups. This has declined with an increase in community woodland ownership across Scotland.

### **What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?**

An intact and accessible plantation forest is a valuable, income-generating asset for a community, and so it has proved with Abriachan. Together with a strong, financially and commercially literate management group and the forest's proximity to Inverness (which has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth in the last ten years), this has resulted in a diverse and financially resilient forest management unit.

The group has placed a lot of store on access to a professional forester – a locally recruited consultant. This

provided AFT with credibility in respect of how the group were regarded by external groups, and has given the group confidence that they are managing the forest professionally. The woodland is managed to UKWAS standard and recent sales of timber have been by standing sales.

### **How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?**

This example of forest transformation with attendant social, economic and environmental benefits is replicable, as demonstrated by North West Mull Community Woodland Company amongst others.

If the creation and sustained delivery of public benefits from community ownership were factored into the original purchase price of Abriachan Forest, i.e. retrospectively deducted from the monies paid to the State, it can be argued that there could be a balance of funds owing from the State to AFT.

**Key messages:** what would we want people to take away from this?

A community with drive and the will to succeed and which contains a mix of skill sets, specifically financial and/or commercial, can take on medium to large-scale conifer plantation management, restructure the plantations and produce public benefits and a well-managed forest.

Employment, social, health and environmental benefits accruing from a change of ownership and control can be recognised and valued; thus allowing communities to be able to access medium and large scale plantations, currently beyond their financial reach, at a much reduced financial value from that of open market or 'best' value, as is required under the Community Asset Transfer Scheme (CATS).