

Name: Knoydart Forest Trust

Place: Knoydart, Highlands

Headline: A trust managing local woodlands for the benefits of both the local and wider community

Keywords: community control, land reform, community enterprise, landscape

What is the context?

1. **Historical context:** Knoydart was faced with the uncertainty of a private absentee owner, who did not communicate, and neglected both people and place. It was therefore a small jump to think people on ground can do better. Funding was secured to produce a woodland management plan, although funders were aware that the group was not acted for the owner. The Forest Trust and the Foundation have always been distinct, with the Foundation as owner, and the Trust as forest manager. The plan gave scope for funding for access works, and meant that the Trust could prepare in advance, so the Foundation could show action on the ground quickly and have funds once handover completed. This approach would not be possible now! It relied on working with sympathetic locally based agency staff.

2. **Current context:** Forest should pay for itself, but not be expected to subsidise other activities. There is no transfer of surplus to Foundation, nor does the Trust pay any lease or charge. Some locals feel that Foundation should lease the asset to the Trust. Trust argues that this is not necessary, as the Trust provides other benefits to the community in place of direct financial payment. The Trust also makes money from private sector contracts to reinvest in the Foundation's woodlands, so the Trust is a net contributor to the Foundation's woodland.

What was the initial aim?

Doing something better than the previous dysfunctional owner (who happened to be private), action was stimulated by frustration with the owner. Take ownership of some land and manage it.

Objectives

Forest Design Plan is being revised, but these are likely ongoing objectives

- 1 expand and enhance native woods and diversify non native woodlands
- 2 enhance biodiversity and habitat resilience
- 3 develop and sustain employment and economic activity
- 4 produce locally useful timber
- 5 encourage access and enjoyment of woodlands

What actually happened and what has been achieved?

Started off by implementing management plan on the Foundation's land.

Developments outside the forest have been opportunistic, rather than strategic. For example

1. Excavator bought for path work in the forest is now used for other local contracts, bringing in additional income to the Trust.
2. Private owners on Knoydart have come to the Trust, seeking Trust input into private forestry. This has allowed the Trust to build a reputation for linking the private with the community sectors (essential for success, especially in remote areas). This would not have happened if the Trust had not developed a reputation for successful work on community owned land. Delivers both financial benefits to Trust, but also the ecological benefits of landscape scale activity and habitat networks.

The Trust tries to manage land in a locally appropriate way (e.g. felling being done in small coupes, doing the restock themselves, using local labour if available). However they are pragmatic, and will bring in outside labour when necessary (e.g. to meet grant deadlines for the rhododendron clearance). Some activity is just mainstream forestry (have to make it pay), some of it is not.

Achievements

1. Financial sustainability
2. Rhododendron clearance has been the biggest commitment and success.
3. New planting
4. Harvesting programme in remote and unstable blocks of Sitka
5. Restock programme being paid for and implemented.
6. Paths and visitor facilities are an important benefit for local community
7. Deer management within fence around the village means people can garden again! (however complaints that people do not see deer any longer)
8. Fuelwood business and timber products has met targets and is supplying good quality products. Some tension with one individual who was producing low quality firewood, and who would not engage, despite the Trust developing a mechanism that would have allowed him to continue.
9. Development of private sector work. The constructive relationship with private owners has helped a wider vision for Knoydart's woods, and also financial sustainability

Trust staff and the majority of locals (demonstrated in forest plan scoping responses) are relatively happy with how things are working out, however:

1. A few locals may be less content with the Trust's progress. Some of this is about displacement, some about the financial relationship between the Trust and the Foundation.
2. Some discomfort that the small Trust staff have to push forward almost all of the planning and delivery in the forest. Trust tends to stay within its forest comfort zone, and the Foundation can get tied up with its own concerns, so some opportunities are not realised. Tension between "what you could do is" vs "what we should do is" (an inevitable result of asking people what they want!). This might be addressed by developing working groups, or using champions to develop and take forward activities in the forest, supported by the Trust.
3. The community initiative (Trust/Foundation) is an adolescent, still needing to mature and go forward.

What is the evidence for these outcomes?

Jobs: 3.5fte (including seasonal employees), plus subcontractors (majority local to Highlands).

Invasive rhododendron control was a key part of the finances, and early activity (missing now!) 30,000 acres is the landscape scale, with a focus on a 240ha plantation, containing 60ha of dense infestation. £0.25m cost.

Conifer harvesting and restock 2 big export jobs. 20ha & 8000 tonnes. 10ha & 4000 tonnes.

New planting on community land c200 ha. 8 new planting schemes, with one in pipeline. Ground is transferred from Foundation to Trust at nil value. Cash positive, especially on larger schemes.

New planting elsewhere At least eight schemes elsewhere (on neighbouring privately owned land).

Firewood business: now 180m³/£16,000 last year, with plans to increase. Not a great moneymaker on its own, however it helps to justify some equipment (tractor), helps with employment, reduces Knoydart's carbon footprint, and provides a quality product for the community.

Access c16,000 visitors pa to Inverie. Knoydart's main economic activity is visitors, mostly self-catering, and the Trust provides a service by maintaining the landscape and paths. Some tension between what Trust should do as community benefit, and the extent to which it benefits private businesses.

What factors contributed to those outcomes?

1. Access to land, and the opportunity to work out how to do it before acquisition.
2. Gaining skills and expertise along the way, leading to a staff group who know what they are doing, backed by community volunteers
3. Geographical isolation has made it easier for the Trust to compete with private sector.
4. Knoydart was in a political, physical and financial mess, so the only way was up!

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

A local forester creates opportunities that have been lost elsewhere, with the removal of beat foresters and private estate foresters. The community owned forest is an essential component of the Trust's success. The approach has included moving from a sole focus on the financial bottom line, with a recognition within the Foundation of the value of what the Trust delivers. The model could be replicated, and is delivering a better approach to forestry in Knoydart.

What are the key lessons?

- Community control of asset is an enabling thing. The woods have worked as a showcase, and created opportunities that the Trust has been able to act on, taking an entrepreneurial approach.
- Financial stability is critical. A diverse blend of grant, income from community asset, and external contracting income.
- People and organisations make the difference. Forestry is part of bigger picture on Knoydart, but always a core part of it (and this needs to be kept in everyone's minds). Individual characters are important: without key individuals outcomes would have been different. Community dynamics remain interesting, with uncertainty over the extent to which the Trust should meet all community expectations.
- Housing shortage is now a constraint/opportunity.
- Opportunity for private sector to see community sector as another market for their services