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**Name of Project:** North Woods

**Place:** Leckmelm Wood, near Ullapool, Wester Ross, Highlands.

**Headline:** A small softwood plantation supplying some of the needs of a small timber fabricating business as well as a place to live for its employees and their families, and its subsequent conversion to a woodland.

**Keywords:** Wood supply, successful business, place to live and work

### **What is the context?**

Three co-owners had a small woodland establishment and management business which also carried out small land works contracting and shed building. But they wanted to manage their own woodland for at least three reasons (1) challenge of improving an existing wood in terms of biodiversity et (2) supply at least some timber to their own business (3) to support a low impact, low carbon lifestyle including 'experimental' inhabitation. An opportunity arose for them to buy a 30 ha plantation assessed by Forestry Commission Scotland to be uneconomic to manage and harvest at the time.

### **What Actually Happened?**

The first ten years involved some intensive access works as there were no operational tracks within the whole plantation. Some thinning and a little Rhododendron and deer control were carried out. A large number of timber sheds and cabins were constructed to house the business and one family. The plantation contributed an immediate economic benefit of being a very inexpensive place to live and build off-grid accommodation.

After more than 20 years since it was purchased, the woodland now provides an excellent well developed home to North Woods Construction Ltd and 10 permanent residents along with some seasonal workers. The business has developed in a way that was not predictable and probably exceeds early expectations by some way. The business has gone from a shed builder to leading innovator in a Scottish context in timber construction delivering state of the art timber houses albeit still on a very small scale.

The woodland has supplied a significant amount of timber for building within the forest itself and for low cost heating.

Three generations of one family now inhabit the forest and the core of the business is father, son and son-in law who all live in self-built cabins within the forest. In terms of low impact living the dream has been quite well realized.

North Woods is an ongoing experiment with other areas just at the very beginning of development. An area has been cleared for experimental fruit growing and a larger area of food production. The latter is just for the growing population within the woodland but the fruit growing has larger ambitions, which may or may not be realized in a commercial sense. It is intended to grow cherry under cover and to experiment with various hardy northern fruit bushes - building on 10 years in tree and shrub nursery experience in NW Highlands.

It is now planned to establish three woodland crofts, which will provide security and a better sense of ownership to the next generation. It will hopefully also help to unlock some funding for small-scale woodland management and other growing enterprises but that will be hard to develop without some external support.

## **Evidence of Outcomes**

- A thriving small timber-based business and home to 3-4 families associated with it, all living in exceptionally low carbon cabins and relatively low carbon lifestyles.
- Three full time jobs plus ongoing employment of other local self-employed artisans and trades
- Turnover of the design & build business: varies from year to year but £250-500k
- Area of woodland managed: less than 10 ha under management out of 30 ha
- Softwood sawn from the plantation itself: <50 cubic metres/annually plus firewood for 3 households and some given away to friends and locals
- 10 inhabitants plus 2-4 trainees/volunteers
- Biodiversity : the continuous cover regime has tended to increase biodiversity year on year with habitat provided for sparrowhawk, tawny owl, buzzard, siskin, great spotted woodpecker, pine marten and a variety of woodland passerines including tits, goldcrest, treecreeper and crossbill.

## **What factors contributed to those outcomes?**

- The existence of an economic use for timber
- Long term family commitment
- Access to affordable land and access to cheap housing
- The availability of substantial grant support through the SRDP which has supported the construction of a new workshop and processing facilities that has allowed the business to grow and secure three full time jobs
- Relative sympathy of the LA and perhaps their quite extensive experience of caravan and off-grid inhabitants in their area
- An appreciation that longer term significant changes of species to high value conifers and hardwoods and their management has at least the possibility of increasing the economic return of the woodland many fold as this should secured opportunities for generations of makers subsequently living in the woodland.

## **Key messages:**

Woodland including dense plantations offer superb opportunities for low impact, low carbon lifestyles in line with the Scottish Government's low carbon strategy.

Woodlands offer opportunities for businesses with small to medium scale requirements for timber as part of their operations.

Small groups of people living and operating businesses in a wood are likely to lead to long term progressive improvements in species composition and accompanying biodiversity.

The type of woodland (species composition) strongly influences commercial possibilities. Developing uses around the resource available is therefore critical.

The marginal economics of sawing Sitka spruce at small scale are changing. Developing techniques and design expertise to use this material effectively then follow.

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Bernard Planterose

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