

# The Affric Highlands

People's wellbeing is inextricably linked to the ecological health of the land where they live. In the heart of the Scottish Highlands, a progressive rewilding initiative is delivering diverse benefits for nature and local communities.







**R**ewilding offers new opportunities. Opportunities that can reinvigorate local economies while tackling the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate breakdown. It is a journey of transition and transformation at landscape scale. Rewilding Europe’s latest addition to our portfolio of rewilding landscapes, the Affric Highlands, can trace the origins of its odyssey of restoration back over 60 years.

Now, driven forward by the pioneering conservation charity, Trees for Life, this central Highland region of Scotland stands to benefit enormously from an exciting new 30-year mission to upscale and amplify rewilding efforts across 200,000 hectares; from Glen Affric in the east to Glen Shiel in the west. Habitats will be reconnected and lost or fragmented natural processes restored and revitalised, with community engagement central to their vision. It is a vision that seeks to re-establish a dynamic coast to coast natural landscape, where wildlife thrives, and people prosper. And while much of this takes time, there are many opportunities that can be grasped right away to deliver meaningful and tangible results. After all, nature can bounce back remarkably quickly when given the right conditions and space to do so.

### **Amplifying rewilding**

A network of landowners and stakeholders are being connected, coalescing around the idea of recreating contiguous areas of habitat, containing re-wooded mountain sides and riverbanks, rewetted peatland and naturally flowing rivers. By the beginning of 2023, Affric Highlands will also have its very own Rewilding Centre, built at Trees for Life’s flagship 4,000-hectare estate, Dundreggan, where forest restoration, deer control measures and dedicated teamwork has been transforming the landscape since 2008. The new hub will



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become a nexus for rewilding action, discussion and debate – and is designed with inclusivity in mind. It will engage a wider audience with rewilding through educational tools and trails leading from the centre into rewilding habitat; giving those who visit an insight into the theory and practice.

The Dundreggan Rewilding Centre will bring 15 new jobs to the local area, and as interest grows, the centre will contribute indirectly more and more financially to the landscape through visitor accommodation and hospitality. The Affric Highlands is setting out to demonstrate that stronger ecosystems can create stronger local economies through, for instance, nature tourism

and other nature-based enterprise. With crucial support from Rewilding Europe, a close-knit team is forming – led by the ecologist Stephanie Kiel – who brings a wealth of experience and vital community engagement skills to the table. It is community engagement that will drive this rewilding landscape forward, forging relationships that lead to a deep sense of guardianship for nature and its recovery in the wider landscape.

### **A catalyst for nature**

For Affric Highlands’ Team Leader, Stephanie Kiel, there is great scope for habitat regeneration and wildlife comeback. “The potential for nature recovery within Affric Highlands is enormous. Repairing our peatlands is a priority for the climate emergency and can restore some of our most ecologically valuable land. Woodland creation by natural regeneration and where needed, tree planting, can create diverse habitats for countless animal species; from red squirrels and red deer, to capercaillie, wildcat and golden eagle.” From the banks of Loch Ness on the east coast





▲ A Scottish wildcat in pine forest, Cairngorms National Park, Scotland.

◀ A red deer stag stands next to a gnarled Scots pine tree in the Western Highlands of Scotland.

to Loch Alsh on the west coast, a large, connected corridor will be created.

Working with landowners and fisheries trusts, ribbons of riparian woodland will return to the valleys, providing vital shade for fish. Trees for Life will also be an advocate for the return of the critically endangered Scottish wildcat; poised for a recovery thanks to a new purpose-built reintroduction facility now in place in the Cairngorms National Park. Through an association of like-minded landowners, they will support the comeback of beavers from prime agricultural land to sites within Affric Highlands where their catalysing effect on life will be welcomed. And they will help to move the conversation on as Scotland contemplates living with the Eurasian lynx again.

### A growing network

Work is underway to enable this ecological recovery with 20 landowners already on board and more registering their interest. Field visits to different private estates are being conducted to assess each site's rewilding potential.

With natural regeneration of woodland being a key long-term goal, managing browsing pressures from deer – which far exceed the current carrying capacity of the land – is fundamental to the initial rewilding efforts.

Despite great strides made over the last few decades reforesting Glen Affric, there is still much progress to be made. Over much of the wider Affric Highlands territory, islands of sporadic or solitary 'granny pines' stand nearing the end of their life with no younger trees to take their place due to browsing pressures. In partnership with the James Hutton Institute and local Deer Management Groups, sophisticated modelling software is being developed to better inform how any changes in the land and deer management affect the population and distribution of red deer, enabling better decisions to be made between stakeholders across the landscape. As with many rewilding initiatives in human-modified landscapes, a degree of intervention is often required during the first stage before stepping back and letting nature lead.

### Rewilding hearts and minds

But restoring ecological connections is only one part of the Affric Highlands story. Connecting people to this is the other part, as Stephanie explains: "The people and communities within the Affric Highlands area are at the core of the initiative and we are currently setting up a youth engagement project around Drumnadrochit and Fort Augustus. We want to increase the opportunities for young and old alike to experience the natural environment and to consider how nature can create new opportunities for people and their livelihoods."

Opportunities that include providing financial rewards for ecosystem restoration, such as carbon sequestration, will become more commonplace – adding value to land through nature-based businesses. By combining ecological processes with economic outputs, community engagement with rewilding will flourish, winning over both the heart and the head to inspire more action on the ground – leading to an ecologically, economically and socially enriched future for the Affric Highlands.