The Rewild Podcast
By James Shooter
Episode 1
Affric Highlands

Transcript

00:00:01:03
James Shooter
I'm just working my way up the side of a hill to a viewpoint the Alan Watson Featherstone showed me a few years ago. Now, I keep falling over. It's a lot steeper than I remember. Or probably the more likely thing is, I'm less fit than I remember. But I worked my way through the bracken. But if I remember correctly, it is one of the best viewpoints down the whole of the Glen.

00:00:32:10
James Shooter
I'm in, the Northwest Highlands of Scotland, just an hour or so away from my home in the Cairngorms National Park. I'm here to meet the team from Trees for Life, a rewilding charity who've been working on bringing back the Caledonian Forest for 30 years on their 10,000 acre estate, Dundreggan and here in Glen Affric.

00:00:52:02
James Shooter
Wow. Yeah, definitely worth it.

00:01:00:00
James Shooter
Looking out across Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin, these wooded islands are just beautiful. They really give you an insight into what most of Scotland could look like, given the chance.

00:01:16:18
James Shooter
Whilst many visitors come to Scotland for romantic notions of wildness. The truth is, ecologically speaking, we're a massively nature depleted nation. The Caledonian Forest, Scotland's native Pinewoods, once stretched over much of the land, but has now dwindled to just a handful of sites. The remaining trees are aging, and without help, they will struggle to reproduce and disperse, leaving only isolated fragments across the landscape.

00:01:47:07
James Shooter
So where have they gone? Why haven't they come back? And how do you go about regrowing a forest, lost from the memory of modern-day Scotland? I'm James Shooter, host of the Rewild Podcast, and this is Affric Highlands.
James Shooter
Hi, Steve. How are you?

Steve Micklewright
Yeah, not too bad.

James Shooter
Who's this?

00:02:15:00
Steve Micklewright
This is Matteo.

00:02:17:18
James Shooter
Hey Matteo! How are you? Hello?

00:02:20:10
James Shooter
Yeah, it's good to eat, isn't it?

00:02:22:02
Steve Micklewright
Well, he likes a hairy microphone.

00:02:24:03
James Shooter
I can believe that.

00:02:24:10
Steve Micklewright
How'd you get on at Glenn Affric?

00:02:26:09
James Shooter
Steve Micklewright, is the CEO of Trees for Life and a meeting him and Matteo, the microphone sniffing Greyhound at Dundreggan. It's a lovely time of year in the Highlands. The crossover between late summer and early autumn, there's still flashes of pink and purple carpeting, the forest floor as a flowering heather comes to a close and the tips of the birch trees are just starting to get hints of gold.

00:02:50:14
James Shooter
Alan Watson Featherstone is the inspirational guy that started Trees for Life in the 1990s. I was doing some filming with him a few years back and he recalled to the TV crew how he set up the charity. Whilst looking out of the dying forest for the first time, he remembered thinking somebody should be saving it. Eventually it dawned on him - maybe that somebody was him - and so he did. Along with some early volunteers. He set about planting trees in fenced off enclosures.

00:03:18:01

Steve Micklewright
And then over the 30 years since we've existed, we've diversified from tree planting to growing trees, naturally, natural regeneration, to restoring pine woods, to rewilding, to thinking about the reintroductions of beaver and lynx, which should be part of the forest ecosystem, to then thinking that once you have rewilding working, actually that benefits people in communities and the economy as well. So we've really kind of branched out with this one idea of restoring a forest to rewilding the Highlands and getting people back into the landscape.

00:03:49:14
James Shooter
Steve's always worked in nature conservation. You can tell he's passionate and just wants to get on with the job. Prior to moving to Scotland six years ago, he was working in Malta, trying to stop the illegal killing of birds. A highly stressful role with hard won rewards.

00:04:04:08
Steve Micklewright
Yeah, quite a full-on kind of life of conservation, really. And now rewilding is the thing, and I think rewilding is really positive compared to some of the campaigns I've done, this is actually entirely positive.

00:04:16:02
James Shooter
But why does Scotland need rewilding? On the face of it, it's got a lot of wild land, vast expanses of rolling hills, rugged mountains and sweeping vistas. It's got sparkling lochs and winding rivers. Lots of people come here to enjoy the great outdoors. A study in 2021 showed that Scotland ranked a desperately bad 212 out of 240 countries and territories which were measured for their biodiversity intactness. Essentially how much nature we have left. 212 How have we got here? As the climate stabilized after the last Ice Age, Woodland took over much of Scotland's landscapes with birch and Scots pine dominating the map.
The wildlife that relies on those trees thrived, and wolves, bears, lynx and beaver all walked this land. As humans began to clear the trees, to develop agricultural land, to build ships and homes, the Caledonian forests dwindled to just 2% of its former glory. And with it, many of the species that relied upon it became extinct, or their numbers were massively depleted. That's where we've got to today. An ecologically impoverished landscape not functioning as well as it could be.

00:05:28:21
Steve Micklewright
But that's not how it should be. It should be this patchwork. And yes, there should be heather moorland, but there should also be this forest and the peatlands as well. So, what you come to in Scotland is a very managed landscape and the landscape has been managed for generations now for sport. So, in this part of the highlands, it's with deer stalking. So, they are kept here in high numbers in order for people to come out and

shoot them. As for their sport and also for the venison to go into the food chain. Over in the Cairngorms, a bit further south of here, it's predominantly grouse moors.

00:05:59:01
James Shooter
It would take a whole other episode to delve into the complexities of open hill, deer stalking and driven red grouse shooting. But it's fair to say that these two pastimes popularized by Queen Victoria in the 19th century, have led to Scotland's landscapes being shaped the way they are today. In a nutshell, people pay large sums of money to shoot deer and grouse in the highlands. That means it's worthwhile trying to keep a lot of them on your land. Red grouse thrive on moorland, and so shooting estates spend a lot of time and energy making sure the heather clot hills don't succeed into woodland, mainly through burning. Deer browse trees and so when herd numbers soar without native predators left to keep them in check, new saplings don't stand a chance. If you couple that with just under 7 million sheep wandering around, rightly or wrongly, you start to see why this forest isn't regenerating very fast.

00:06:48:09
Steve Micklewright
I think very few people realize that what you see in Scotland is a degraded landscape. Some people call it a wet desert because a lot of the nature that should be here isn't here because of the way we have managed the land. So, people look at it and say: “Oh, it looks wild, it looks natural. Isn't it beautiful? It's got golden eagles, it must be okay.” But actually, it could have so much more if nature was given a chance and nature was allowed to do its own thing in even just a few places, we start to see much quicker change than we're currently seeing.
00:07:17:18
James Shooter
Shifting baseline syndrome is a phrase coined by Daniel Pauly, a French born marine biologist. Simply put, it's environmental amnesia, the accepted norm for the condition of the natural environment decrease over time based on our own memories and experiences. What we consider to be a healthy environment now, our ancestors would think of as degraded. And so, I'm really interested in how trees for life work and what they're doing to reverse these declines.

00:07:43:05
Steve Micklewright
So, we've got sort of four or five things that we focus on, the sort of areas, one of them is understanding rewilding. So, rewilding is this brand-new thing really that we're just learning what it means for Scotland in particular. So, we're doing a lot of ecological studying and try to understand what rewilding might achieve. That's quite interesting because rewilding is an open-ended process. You shouldn't really know what rewilding is going to do, but we're trying to track what it does. When we when we tried to rewire the landscape, what happens? So, we try to understand it. We do some of it ourselves. If we to make rewilding happen here at Dundreggan by planting trees or allowing trees to regenerate naturally and over at Glenn Affric. And we of course have the tree nursery where we grow trees as well.

Also looking at bringing back beavers to Glenn Affric ourselves, is that something that we want to do? So, making it happen. But the big thing on top of that we're trying to enable others. So, Affric Highlands in particular, which is 500,000 acres, about 45 different estates, if I remember rightly, lots of different landowners. We can only rewild that landscape by working with them and with the community to make it happen.

So, enabling is another thing we're moving on to. And then the final bit is involving people. I personally believe not a lot of point in doing much without people benefiting because actually if we weren't here, this would all do itself.

00:08:56:12
James Shooter
And sure enough, there's plenty of people here today here at Dundreggan, Trees for Life's very own estate - 10,000 acres dedicated entirely to nature's recovery.

00:09:06:07
Steve Micklewright
Dundreggan is where we practice what we preach. It is where we demonstrate how to grow rare trees in a nursery. This is where we demonstrate, if you fence off an area of land with a remnant of the wild forest in a ravine, it can recover.

00:09:19:16
James Shooter
Back in 2008, when the charity first took ownership, there was just one person working here - a Deerstalker. There's now eight. Next year, when the pioneering Rewilding Centre opens, there'll be a further 15 to 20 tree nursery staff, education offices and people working in hospitality. Not to mention a team of hard-working volunteers. And yes, there's still a deerstalker too. Thirty or so jobs off the back of rewilding because to Trees for Life rewilding means re-peopling too. In the nineties, when Alan decided, he was going to do something about the dying Caledonian Forest, the way to save it was to fence-off an area to keep the deer out and plant trees.

00:09:59:06
Steve Micklewright
Great. A lot of progress over nearly 2 million trees have been planted, which is brilliant. However, actually, if you go around here and you find a little ravine, you'll find little pockets of the original wild forest. The wild trees that should be here anyway. And so, what we're starting to move to is a model where there aren't pockets of existing natural vegetation that can sell seed and grow themselves, that's where we plant. So, we're starting to think about actually some areas that we don't plant, we fence them off to keep the deer out and we let nature come in. And we're even looking at some wild cattle introducing cattle to these areas to break up the ground a bit to give the tree seeds a bit

of open ground to be able to get started in. So, not so much tree planting perhaps in the future and much more of trees growing themselves.

00:10:46:11
James Shooter
Trees growing themselves in. It certainly sounds like a sensible approach, giving nature the chance to carry on what it's been doing for millions of years. I'm headed back to the tree nursery now to meet James Rainey, senior ecologist at the charity, and he's been leading on the Wild Trees initiative.

00:11:04:23
James Rainey
Hello! Which tunnel are the grafts in, you know, of the pines.

Tree Nursery Volunteer
At tunnel six.

James Rainey
Do you mind if we go and take a look?

Tree Nursery Volunteer
Yes, it's fine.

00:11:15:00
James Shooter
What are you showing me?

00:11:15:24
James Rainey
So, these are… well basically during the Affric Highlands Project I've been helping out with that a bit. And there was a site we went to where there were three old pines left from a really ancient pinewood site. You know, they're all surrounded by these big historical pine stumps. There are only three survivors and one of them had just been debarked by deer, even though it was an old tree line, which is really unfortunate. But we managed to get out. there just in time this year and actually take cuttings off the branches and then graft them on to existing little pines. So, basically some of these are clones of the tree that died. And then there's other ones that are clones to the other two.

James Shooter
Wow I didn't know you could do that!

James Rainey
Yeah, this is the first time we've done it. Grafting the Pines.

00:12:02:17
James Shooter
I've only been with James for a couple of minutes and we're already geeking out over how they've managed to save the genetics of a few aging survivors. Those clone trees will be returned to the site soon. Ready prepared for the best chance of survival. I can tell I'm going to learn a lot from him.

00:12:18:15
James Rainey
Yes. So, we are in the Trees for Life tree nursery and what we're growing in the tree nurseries, we specialize really in these mountain plants. So, we're growing a lot of mountain willows, dwarf birch, all of these species which in Scotland have become very restricted. And they've got such small populations in a lot of places that they struggle to spread out on their own, which is why we focus on them here at the nursery.

00:12:43:14
James Shooter
So, I nearly died one time about four years ago, trying to photograph some dwarf willow in the mountains of Glenfeshie. It was beneath a snow line and it was melting away, and the floor just went beneath me and I literally fell. I say literally, I'm exaggerating, but I fell halfway down a cliff and I landed on a massive boulder. And if that boulder wasn't there, then I would have been toast. But yeah, they're in pretty stunning places.

(Narrating)
These wee trees that are not only found clinging onto hard-to-reach ravines once made up miniature forests high up in the hills called Montane Scrub, a knee-high forest now almost completely missing in Scotland, but can still be found across Scandinavia. But we'll come back to that later.

00:13:26:15
James Rainey
So, the Caledonian Forest is a type of forest that once covered large parts of Scotland. The bits that remain are examples of old growth woodland. So, we've got lots of really old gnarly trees, typically Scots pines associated with the Caledonian Forest, but you get lots of other species as well, species like birch and oak and so on. We know that in a specific Caledonian Forest fragment called Glen Loyne, we actually have a pine tree in there that's been dated to the 1400s. So, that tree's going on about 600 years old, which is incredible.

00:13:59:15
James Shooter
600 years old. Imagine what a tree has seen. At 400 years old, it could still have wolves passing by as a sprightly centenarian, possibly even a lynx. Our ancient trees are windows to the past. These aging giants lovingly referred to as Granny Pines in Scotland, are completely individual, gnarled and twisted, sculpted by the wind. They give shape and structure to the forest, but most people won't encounter such majestic beings.

Our native woodland covers just 4% of Scotland. A total woodland cover sits around 18%, meaning more than three quarters is made up of non-native forestry plantations. Of course, we need timber, but if people saw the beauty and brilliance of our native trees, surely they would demand those figures to be more equal.

00:14:49:20
James Rainey
So, I think a massive thing here is actually connecting people with forest. It's getting people out to see these places. A lot of our plantations in the past have been the areas that are more accessible to people. They've got tracks through them, they've got paths they were publicly owned and so people had access. Now that we've got better access rights in Scotland, people are starting to get out and explore some of these other woods that might have been harder to get to in the past, more difficult. And I think people get annoyed. They're seeing these places for themselves, people taking photographs, becoming more engaged. That's ultimately the way to connect with these places and to get that message out.

00:15:27:11
James Shooter
And it's not just the trees that people connect to. These ancient Caledonian forests are refuges for all kinds of creatures. One of my prized possessions is a half-mangled cone dropped by a Crossbill from the top of a tree and caught by yours truly 40 foot below. I've enjoyed the rare sounds of Capercaillie on cool spring mornings echoing out of the forest.

I've seen Red Squirrels and Pine martens chase about in the canopy and Goldeneye ducklings leap to the ground from their tree trunk nest, experiencing wildlife is important to so many of us, and it's not just the charismatic species that call this place home.

00:16:01:21
James Rainey
We have things like the Aspen hoverfly, the Pine hoverfly as well. Species which really rely on lots of these old dying or dead trees or lots of the rare species that still live in Caledonian forests are associated with decaying wood. So rotten wood is a really, really important habitat for lots of things. And that includes the hoverflies, it includes lots of different kinds of beetles that live in and old growth forests.

It also includes the things that feed on those things, like Woodpeckers, for example, or growth forest can be really important for them. There's lots of grubs in the dead wood, which they can feed on.

00:16:39:03
James Shooter
Amazing. Yeah, sounds so rich when you start talking through all the different intricate life that they support. One of my favourites is I think, tree lungwort. And that's because it's I mean, you'll correct me if I'm wrong, but basically three organisms from three

different kingdoms all working together as warden structure, basically. I mean that's amazing, like fungi, bacteria and algae.

00:17:05:10
James Rainey
So, so tree lungwort is a really interesting species because the cyanobacteria which form part of the organism, they fix nitrogen from the air and they turn it into nitrates, which, whenever the lungwort dies and falls off the tree, it then gets returned to the soil below. So actually, lungwort is like a natural fertilizer in old growth woodlands.

00:17:26:13
James Shooter
I love that I can mention a random leafy lichen from the forest and James is able to reel out the ecological importance of such a species to the wider ecosystem. Everything is connected. Unfortunately, that wider ecosystem is not functioning as it should. When James was tasked with surveying the last remnants of the Caledonian Forest, he assessed four characteristics of health and resilience.

Healthy woodlands would have the ability to regenerate themselves, would be well connected, large scale, and have an ability to move out across the landscape. Sadly, James found that 70% of surveyed sites were subject to high or very high herbivore impacts. Only a handful of locations ticked all the boxes.

00:18:07:16
James Rainey
It's places like Glenfeshie, Mar Lodge, where we have this landscape scale deer management, which is allowing all of these kinds of characteristics to develop. It's a allowing regeneration to happen within and outside the woodland, it's allowing these little patches of forest to re-join up again. And it's allowing diverse regeneration to take place.

00:18:28:14
James Shooter
The 1700s through the 1800s was a very turbulent time for Scotland. Wealthy landowners removed their tenants, replacing them with more profitable sheep and lots of them. By the turn of the 20th century many of the remaining woodlands have been subject to a couple of hundred years of very heavy grazing and browsing pressure. The clearances led to the destruction of the traditional clan system here, beginning a pattern of rural depopulation that is never truly recovered to this day.

00:18:56:19
James Rainey
But our sheep numbers have declined in parts of the Highlands. Deer have basically replaced them. So now deer are one of the major issues in our woods. Deer are a natural part of the ecosystem, but they're current numbers in the highlands mean that they have very, very heavy impacts on these woodlands, and deer can impact woodlands in lots of different ways, but one of the main ways is by eating young trees. And whenever

they feed on young trees repeatedly, they prevent them from being able to grow up to replace trees that die and so over time, that forest starts to fall apart. And in parts of the highlands, particularly areas that are now quite remote from where people are, we see that these forests are now an advanced stage of degradation.

As the numbers start to reduce and the vegetation starts to grow up, they will then focus on the tastier things so they can still suppress quite a lot of diversity in the landscape that would otherwise be able to establish. What that means is that some of our forests that are developing today where deer numbers are being reduced a little bit but not enough, they're going to be much less diverse than they'd otherwise be.

00:20:03:03
James Shooter
That lack of diversity means the trees are less resilient to further threats like climate change and disease.

00:20:09:00
James Rainey
Another major issue is invasive non-native species. So, as I was saying earlier, a large number of our ancient woodlands in the highlands were converted into conifer plantations.

00:20:18:18
James Shooter
While some of these ancient woodland sites are now under restoration, saplings of non-native conifers from historic forestry plantations are trying to re-establish themselves competing with native vegetation along the way. Rhododendron is a densely growing, invasive shrub. It was planted up in the grounds of estates for its evergreen leaves and beautiful flowers, but it adds further misery by choking out the woodland floor. Allowing native trees to grow themselves in, perhaps isn't as simple as it seemed.

00:20:45:23
James Rainey
To give a little bit of background to this, in Scotland, the kind of usual way, in inverted commas, to restore an area is to put up a deer fence and maybe do some planting and then walk away from it, let it kind of get on with it. A huge problem is that often these deer fences are breached quite early on, and so deer get inside. Whenever they have a choice of things to eat, they focus on the tastier things, so they lower the diversity of trees that are coming up. And of course, the other problem with that model is that fences often only cover small patches of a woodland. Or even where the full woodland is covered, it doesn't extend far enough outside the wood to allow trees to really move through the landscape, to adjust, to change.

So actually, our model of restoration is not delivering what we really need in the Highlands, and we need to move towards that more landscape scale approach to deer management.

00:21:36:02
James Shooter
We jump in a pickup, as James wants to take me higher up on the hills above Dundreggan, to an area where Montane Scrub is regenerating. We get out above the standard tree line and at first glance it's just a carpet of brown. Nothing much to see here. We walk through a gate in the six-foot-high deer fence and it soon becomes apparent that the dwarf trees are everywhere.

00:21:58:10
James Rainey
So, we've come to Carn na Caorach, which is one of my favourite places. It is a kind of a group of hills at the back of Dundreggan, which is Trees for Life's main rewilding area and Carn na Caorach has a big enclosure around it now. So, for the last few years, it's been fenced from deer.

Scotland has lost almost all of its Montane Scrub. Montane Scrub is the stuff where you go, you know, you're walking through your woodlands and a healthy landscape and the trees start to become sparser at a certain altitude. And then you start seeing more kind of shrubs and stuff instead of big trees growing.

00:22:35:18
James Shooter
This missing ecosystem could be capturing carbon, slowing the flow of rainfall and snowmelt, reducing flooding on lower ground and providing vital habitat in itself. Birds like ring ouzel will thrive in this landscape. Perhaps even one day Blue Throat might sing from the dwarf trees, as they do in Norway. Even our very own Red grouse is a subspecies of the continental Willow grouse.

Surely that would thrive there too, without the need for excessive management practices, like in our uplands today.

00:23:02:20
James Rainey
So, some of the things that we've been thinking about is how actually in a lot of these landscapes where tree planting has taken place, there already are remnant populations of wild trees there. And often these remnant populations are either in inaccessible places like ravines or on crags, where there's lots of other diverse wildlife surviving in those areas, lots of associated wildflowers and perhaps invertebrates and other things, or those areas are woodlands, open to very heavy impacts, and as a result, they're kind of on their last legs and they really, really need that attention and support.

So, we want to redirect some of that effort from tree planting towards actually getting to these areas which are really, really threatened, or these diversity hotspots that survive in the landscape and working outwards from them.

00:23:48:04
James Shooter
The best kinds of woodlands are those that pull themselves together. The 'Wild Trees framework' will support natural regeneration of woodland by identifying a zone around the remnant seed trees and prioritizing that for protection either through substantial deer fencing or ideally wider landscape scale reductions in the herbivore populations. Outside that core area, sensitive tree planting can assist the diversity and spread of the woodland. Given the chance these core areas will march out and claim new ground and old haunts.

"This especially is a kind of landscape of hope right here. Do you feel hopeful about it all?"

00:24:21:12
James Rainey
Yeah, I feel really hopeful. I think that everything's changing in Scotland at the moment. I mean, to be working here at a time whenever the whole model for the way things are is being challenged and where we're really starting to think about how to do this restoration really well. It's yeah, it's really an honour to be here at this time.

00:24:41:15
James Shooter
Trees for Life have been rewilding at Dundreggan for 15 years or so, but it's Glen Affric where things first started for the charity. Is back in the car to drive an hour or so to the other side of the hill.

"I'm just turning onto the single-track road for Glen Affric. It's a very obvious transition from the landscape I've been driving through up till now, which is mostly been sheep pasture and blocks of forestry. I'm now getting into the good stuff. Really beautiful woodland."

This National nature reserve has been called the most spectacular Glen in Scotland. Sure enough, it's one of my favourites. It hosts one of the best remaining tracks of Caledonian Forest remaining and forms the centre of Rewilding Europe's ninth core rewilding area, Affric Highlands.

"I'm here to meet Stephanie Kiel. I'm just hoping I can be on time. The sun starting to peek through the clouds. And I know how beautiful this glen is. I might have to stop for a quick picture along the way."

00:26:08:04
James Shooter
Hi, Steph. How are you?

Stephanie Kiel
I'm good. Nice to meet you.

00:26:15:04
Stephanie Kiel
Wow. Look at this "fly agaric" You got it straight on.

00:26:17:24
James Shooter
Wow. They are stunning.
00:26:21:21
Stephanie Kiel
Oh, look at this one. I have to take a picture.

00:26:24:10
James Shooter
"That is amazing."
I needn't have worried about getting distracted by some wild wonders on the way. I'm in good company. Steph wanders off the path halfway up to the Loch Affric viewpoint. She spots a group of bright red fly agaric erupting out of the undergrowth. The classic fairy tale toadstool, candy red with bright white spots. As we reach the top of the path, the view opens out.

This has to be one of the best effort versus reward vistas in Scotland. Less than 10 minutes from the car park and we're encircled by rich forest, clear lochs, and imposing mountains, 360 degrees of loveliness. This truly is an inspirational scene. The trees are creeping up, the hillsides finally allowed to spread after centuries of suppression. This is Glen Affric, an impressive as it is, Trees for Life have their eyes on an even bigger prize.

00:27:18:19
Stephanie Kiel
Affric Highlands is a 30-year initiative with the vision to rewild not only a small area of land, but basically landscape scale. And we're looking at the area broadly between the East Coast of Scotland and the West Coast, starting broadly somewhere near Loch Ness and Drumnadrochit, and then going all the way over to Kintyre, around 200,000 hectares in total.

00:27:40:10
James Shooter
That's almost the size of Luxembourg. For Scotland, that's big.

00:27:44:14
Stephanie Kiel
So, the bigger the area you can work with, the more likely it will make a difference.

00:27:49:11
James Shooter

And do you think that's maybe where we've gone wrong in the past a little bit? Kind of concentrating on nature reserves a bit too much maybe and putting a fence around a little bit of nature here and a little bit of nature there.

00:28:00:15
Stephanie Kiel
I don't think that that is necessarily wrong. I think that rewilding is something that, you know, in its widest sense you can do, you know, even in your own garden by just creating all these little pockets. But if you want to make an impact, then I don't think it works to simply concentrate on a small area.

00:28:19:17
James Shooter
Impact. That's what it's all about. But it's great to hear that we all have a role to play. And part of that role is letting go and seeing what happens. Ultimately, we've tried to manage and control nature too much in the past. Sometimes for practical reasons, sometimes just for the sake of neatness. We've all been guilty of it at some point in our lives.

00:28:38:04
Stephanie Kiel
And this is where ecosystem restoration also comes because that allows nature to become that again and make itself. Not determining that this tree should be here and this should be a bog and this should be none of that. It should nature determine itself, basically. And we stand back and let it do and go: Oh, wow, look at that!

00:28:56:18
James Shooter
But letting go is hard. You have to kind of sit on your hands and force yourself not to get too involved in the management of nature. This is especially challenging when you're working with over 40 land partners.

00:29:07:01
Stephanie Kiel
There's a whole raft of different people and trying to find a point for every single one of them to engage is exactly the key question. How do you how do you actually do that? And I think what I usually try to do is I try to find the common ground, a common interest. And for some people, it may be nature, for some people, it may be a future for their kids, For some people it may be making money - right now.

00:29:35:05
James Shooter
With so many people to bring together, you're never going to get them all on board at once. Trees for Life are concentrating on what they refer to at the early adopters, a smaller group of land managers who were keen to get going straight away. As the first success stories come to life, it is hoped this will create a snowball effect, gathering momentum and pulling in further partners who want to get involved.

00:29:55:05
Stephanie Kiel
What happens is what everywhere is, you know, you see what your neighbour is doing, and you go: What are you doing over there? How does that work? Who's it? Oh, it's Trees for Life. Okay. Right. You know, and we may then, you know, if somebody says, oh, I think my neighbour would be quite interested. Can you make the introduction? Great. Thank you. And there's my favourite quote, an old Socrates quote, which is, you know: 'Don't spend all your energy on fighting the old but spend it on building the new.'

00:30:18:18
James Shooter
And you know what? Socrates and Steph are right! Most people are cautious of change, understandably so. You don't win people over by trying to force their hand. You must do this, and you can't do that. Funnily enough, most people don't like being told what to do. I know I don't. But if you can show that change can bring opportunities, suddenly that change is more appealing.

00:30:40:21
Stephanie Kiel
The local people are at the very heart of the initiative. And I'm obviously very aware of the. people saying: 'Oh, well, you know, you're just trying to get people out because you just want nature there is no place for people.' And I don't think that that is the right way to go about. And I don't think it would work like that at all because people have been living in this landscape for thousands of years. There were many more people here when we had a lot more nature. And now we've got some remnants and we've got very few people. So, I do believe that having more nature will allow more people to be here.

00:31:14:11
James Shooter
Rural depopulation, like for many places across Europe, is a real issue in Scotland. Young people devoid of opportunity in the places they grew up, are leaving to the towns and cities instead.
As part of Affric Highlands, Trees for Life are developing the 'Changemakers Program', a project to work with young people from local schools and involve them in protecting the nature around them by giving them the support and tools to take action themselves.

00:31:37:16
Stephanie Kiel
So, Trees for Life have obviously had, I don't know how much woodland they've created at Dundreggan - a fair bit, and some of it was registered for woodland carbon credits and Trees for Life have sold the woodland carbon credits, or some of them, over the past few years. And thinking about it, they decided that it would be right to give a share of the money they've made with it to the local communities to spend on whatever hole needs filled, basically.

And the idea for Affric Highlands is that with the landowners who we are working with, we will do exactly the same. So, we will help them to develop woodland or peatland carbon credits, but we will sell this not just as a carbon credit, but as something that is a natural capital rewilding bundle. And it comes naturally with a community share, basically, and that will hopefully distribute bits of money into the local communities where it's needed and where people can then decide, how do we actually use this money, what do we do with it? And hopefully it'll that will reconnect landowners and local communities and a bit more than they are at the moment.

00:32:49:24
James Shooter
If Trees for Life gets this right, it could be game changing for rewilding here. If ecosystem restoration can be financed by private money, bringing ecological gains and carbon sequestration whilst bringing financial benefits to landowners and local communities, it will be a win – win - win. Who doesn't want to see social justice rise alongside nature's recovery? This model could not only be rolled out across the Affric Highlands landscape, all 200,000 hectares of it, but far beyond.

For now, the focus here in Glen Affric and the surrounding landscape is to get ecological recovery happening quickly on as much ground as possible, showcasing those early wins will be vital for the overall success of this ambitious project. For me, Glen Affric is a symbol of hope. No matter how many times I visit, I come away feeling uplifted and optimistic.

I just wish more people would experience this for themselves because if they did, I think they'd be shocked at the richness that Scottish woods can carry. It's humbling to think of what those 600-year-old Pine trees grew up alongside, but it's also exciting to think of what their saplings might see too. Perhaps a return to wilder surroundings. Here's hoping.