



All for one and one for all

In the Affric Highlands of Scotland, co-ownership of rewilding is ensuring everyone benefits from nature recovery.



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4,690

Official Affric Highlands partners now covering 4,690 ha (secured) and 16,688 ha (pending), with discussions ongoing for 42,727 ha in four additional private estates.

A broad coalition


In September 2021, Rewilding Europe welcomed the Affric Highlands in Scotland as the ninth rewilding landscape in its expanding portfolio. Together with local partner Trees for Life, which has been rewilding the Scottish Highlands for over 30 years, we are now working to upscale and amplify rewilding efforts across 200,000 hectares – from Loch Ness in the east to Glen Shiel in the west.

“Our vision is to create a rewilding landscape with a long-term difference,” explains Affric Highlands team leader Stephanie Kiel. “To bring about lasting change, we need to involve people.

This is why we are working to form a broad coalition of partners – from landowners and entrepreneurs right through to students and community members. We want to use the common interests of people in the Affric Highlands as the basis for a progressive and shared agenda. An agenda that not only enhances nature, but strengthens local economies and enriches lives too.”

Invaluable remnants

Today, efforts to recover nature in the Affric Highlands are primarily focused on woodland, peatland and riparian restoration. In 2022, much of the work carried out by the Affric Highlands

- **Country**
 Scotland
- **Focal landscape**
 Affric Highlands
- **Size of landscape**
 200,000 ha
- **Work started in**
 2021
- **Larger landscape**
 Scottish highlands west of Loch Ness, from Glen Affric in the east to Glen Shield in the west.
- **Main habitats**
 Caledonian forests, peatlands, grasslands, rivers, lakes and mountain hill sides.
- **Focal species**
 Red deer, roe deer, Scottish wildcat, red squirrel, pine martin, Atlantic salmon, Eurasian lynx, Tauros.
- **Team Leader**
 Stephanie Kiel



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“Supporting and enabling nature recovery will always lie at the heart of what we do. To bring about lasting change, we need to involve people.”

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rewilding team involved identifying wild trees that already exist in the landscape – fragments of the ancient Caledonian Forest, which once extended across most of Scotland.

As a result of widespread clearance, the planting of non-native tree species, and grazing pressure from unnaturally high deer populations, the Caledonian Forest now covers less than 20,000 hectares, but is still home to some of the UK’s most threatened wildlife, such as the capercaillie, red squirrel and Scottish wildcat. Many of the trees in remnant patches, which include Scots pine, juniper, birch, willow, rowan and aspen, have naturally evolved in the landscape over thousands of years.

“There is very little of the forest left, but what remains is incredibly valuable,” explains Affric Highlands enterprise manager Marian Bruce. “Our focus is to ensure those trees survive, and

that we protect them against overgrazing by deer, so that natural regeneration can take place. This helps to maximise genetic and natural diversity, and the resilience of trees in the landscape to variables such as climate change.”

Engaging estates

Carrying out ecological surveys has allowed the Affric Highlands rewilding team to engage many estates across the rewilding landscape. This has seen agreements drafted with some, while discussions are ongoing with a number of others.

“We bring in ecologists for free, conduct wild tree and peatland surveys, and make a general ecological assessment of the estate,” explains Bruce. “We then make recommendations as to how the owner of the land could move forward with nature recovery, which includes looking at potential funding

sources. There are various schemes and grant funding mechanisms available.”

Protecting trees and supporting forest regeneration in the Scottish Highlands typically means putting up fences. It may also mean controlling deer numbers. Every landowner is different, which means discussions about rewilding are a very bespoke process.

“We encourage owners of estates to think about the future,” says Stephanie Kiel. “Do they want to continue with lots of deer, for example, or can they visualise moving towards a healthier, naturally regenerating landscape with lower numbers of deer. This is the journey we are trying to take them on.

“Traditional ways of managing land are embedded here, so for some people taking the decision to do things differently is incredibly difficult. But we want to show landowners new options – options that will add socio-economic as



◀ The Attadale Estate.

▶ Glen Affric's recovering landscape boasts a stunning mix of pinewoods, lochs, rivers and mountains.

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 “We want to show landowners new options that will add socio-economic as well as ecological value to their land and the surrounding landscape.”

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The 12,000-hectare Attadale Estate is typical of many estates in the Affric Highlands. There is already a focus on the recovery of natural forest here – all of the non-native conifer woodlands have been felled and are being replaced with a mixture of Scots pine, birch, hazel, aspen and willow. A collaboration with Trees for Life has seen red squirrels reintroduced, while the estate is part of a deer management group, which sees deer culled to control their impact on the landscape.

“We want to do the best we can for the environment,” says Joanna Macpherson, who runs Attadale on behalf of her family, together with her husband Alec. “Supporting nature recovery makes sense on many levels.”

Generating community wealth

Scotland is a wealthy country, with abundant natural and human resources. Yet it is also characterised by highly aggregated land ownership, which means around 400 individuals own 50% of the country’s privately-owned land. Zeroing in on the Affric Highlands, there are around 40 privately owned estates across 200,000 hectares of the landscape. Other landowners include the Scottish government, environmen-

tal NGOs such as Trees for Life, The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), while there is also some community-owned land.

One of the key objectives of rewilding in the Affric Highlands is to generate sustainable community wealth, using the recovery of nature and natural assets to create economic and social value for the broadest spectrum of people living in the landscape.

One pioneering way of enabling communities to benefit from rewilding is to disburse revenue generated from the sale of carbon credits.

In 2022, two community groups in the Affric Highlands rewilding landscape shared funding of more than 26,000 euros. This was generated from sales of carbon credits or ‘units’, based on the restoration of native woodland in the 4000-hectare Dundreggan Estate, which is owned and managed by Trees for Life. This sum represents one-third of the money generated from sales – the other two-thirds will be reinvested in rewilding.

Each unit represents a tonne of atmospheric carbon absorbed and stored by the Allt Ruadh woodland, where Trees for Life has planted more than 250,000 native trees. They are being sold to organisations already taking action to reduce their carbon footprints to as close to zero as possible, but which want to offset unavoidable emissions as they work towards this goal. Trees for Life estimates that further sales of carbon units from the woodland could generate further funds of around 20,000 euros for the local community.

“This is the model we want to pursue across the whole Affric Highlands landscape,” explains Marian Bruce. “How development of the model plays out in practice is yet to be seen, but sharing

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18

people employed in the Dundreggan Rewilding Centre, of which six are under 30.



JAMES SHOOTER

nature-based revenue in this way will enable us to create a kind of social permanence based on landscape recovery.”

In 2022, Rewilding Europe received a grant of 365,000 euros (400,000 dollars) from multinational delivery services company FedEx. In addition to directly funding rewilding efforts in the Affric Highlands, the grant will also support the development of a carbon credit standard for rewilding across Europe, with the Affric Highlands acting as a main pilot area.

A sense of belonging

Young people are the future of rewilding, which means engaging them and harnessing their energy, ideas, skills and passion is incredibly important. They often feel the need for change more urgently too, especially in Scotland’s shrinking rural communities, where affordable housing is often in short supply and job opportunities are frequently limited.

Launched in December 2022, Change Makers is a youth empowerment programme designed and run by Trees for Life and the Affric Highlands rewilding team. In the years ahead, it will give young people living in and around the Affric Highlands rewilding landscape (aged 14-26) the opportunity to develop their own nature and community-based

businesses and livelihoods, ensuring local rewilding efforts not only deliver an ecological impact, but a socio-economic one too.

For Mollie Saunders, the Affric Highlands Change Makers Project Officer, the programme is all about giving young people ownership. This can then lead to the delivery of a wide range of benefits.

“At the moment if you ask a young person here what would make them stay in the area, or return here after university, many don’t really know. This is mainly because they’ve never been asked the question before. Change Makers is a space and opportunity for young people to come to us and say that they want to do something positive. It’s about giving them responsibility for a valuable project, equipping them with skills, confidence and experience, and making them feel they belong.”

(Read more about the Change Makers programme in the boxout on page 80).

Future focus

In 2023, the efforts of the Affric Highlands rewilding team will continue to put people at the heart of restoration in the landscape.

With visitor numbers on the increase, there are plans to establish a network of nature-based businesses in the Affric Highlands. This will bring

together existing businesses to help them become nature positive and generate more nature-based income. As the year progresses, a growing number of landowners within the landscape will start to receive public and private investment to help fund woodland and river restoration efforts.

“Nature, people and enterprise are the three pillars of rewilding in the Affric Highlands,” says Stephanie Kiel. “There’s a long way to go, but I feel like we’re making progress across the board.”



▲ A volunteer in the Affric Highlands. More and more young people want to be involved in rewilding.