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“Just Listen to the Birdsong Now” – Possibilities for people and nature in community-owned woodland

By **Mairi McFadyen**

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The exhibition A Fragile Correspondence opened last weekend in Venice, one of the eight collateral events for the 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia at the Arsenale Docks, S. Pietro di Castello, Venice. Commissioned by the Scotland + Venice partnership and curated by the Architecture Fringe, -ism, and /other, A Fragile Correspondence responds to Biennale curator Lesley Lokko's theme of The Laboratory of the Future by exploring the nuances connections between land, language and the climate emergency.

In correspondence with the forest landscapes of Loch Ness, local collaborator Mairi McFadyen's exhibited audio piece tells the story of community-owned Abriachan Forest, an invitation to reflect upon the possibilities of collective land stewardship for ecological and social renewal. In providing context, this essay looks to both the Highland's past and its futures in relation to land, language and forests.

Abriachan Forest

“When I first came to Abriachan, you would just see a very dense conifer plantation that had been neglected for many years. It was very dark and you could walk up the road and never hear a bird…” [1]

In 1998, Abriachan Forest was the first community buy-out of a forest area in Scotland. The Abriachan Forest Trust followed in the footsteps of the Assynt Crofters and the Isle of Eigg before them, pioneering a new model of landholding beyond the capitalist logic of private property.[2] There are now many examples of community landownership in Scotland, including islands, rural estates, forestry and woodland, allotments or urban spaces.[3] Community forestry initiatives in particular are significant ‘not only for contesting existing patterns of land tenure, but also in terms of their potential for biodiversity.’ [4]

The modern story of community land has its radical roots here in the *Gàidhealtachd* (the Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands).[5] It is no coincidence, perhaps, that contemporary ideas on ecological land stewardship emerged from a language and culture with strong environmental awareness, long-standing understandings about the interrelationship between land, language and people and a worldview in which ‘people belong to places, rather than places belonging to people.’[6]

Traditional ecological knowledge – or, more poetically, the ‘wisdom that sits in places’[7] – holds clues on how we might cultivate more of a reciprocal relationship with the landscapes in which we live and work. This is not about a nostalgic return to a romantic past, but rather about seeking out forms of resistance to the homogenising and destructive forces of global capitalism – reclaiming rooted and life-affirming practices that have been shaped for millennia by the interactions between people and their environments.

We must do this with care. The translation of concepts and ideas out of their originating languages and ontologies into our own can strip out layers of vital meaning. In seeking this wisdom, we must also seek to understand these concepts in the contexts from which they emerged, or we risk the careless co-option or commodification of culture that is an act of extraction in and of itself.

Ceist an Fhearainn (the land question)

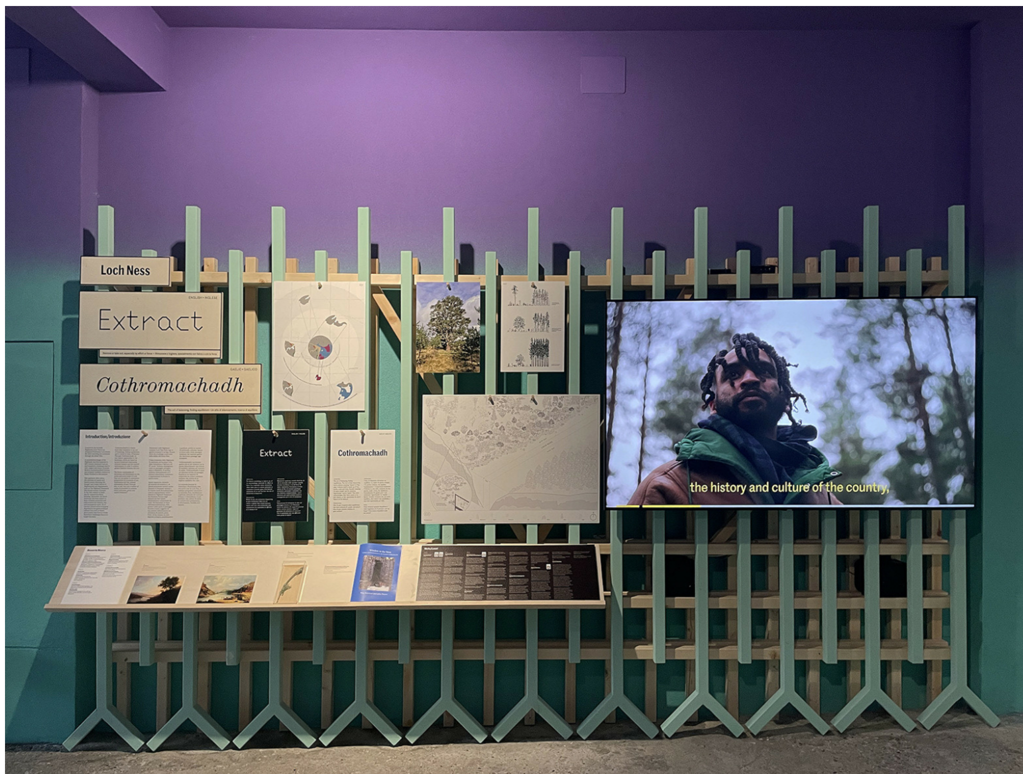
The Highlands suffers the most concentrated pattern of private land ownership in the developed world, with a small number of people owning very large amounts of land.[8] We inhabit the landscapes and entangled legacies of the Highland Clearances, which severed a deep connection to the land and paved the way for industrialisation and colonisation of the modern world. Recent research has shown that slavery-derived wealth was used two hundred years ago to enclose land and natural resources into the large estates which now make up the fabric of the Highland landscape, many of which are maintained in a scorched state for the elite pastimes of grouse shooting and deer stalking.[9]

The global forces of internationalised capital and commercial extraction affect the biodiversity and sustainability of the land at local level.[10] Our open and fragile ecologies are vulnerable to successive iterations of extractive enterprise – deforestation, sheep, single species afforestation, sport shooting, tourism and its fossil fuel entanglements, carbon capture.

The question ‘who owns the land?’ – *Ceist an Fhearainn* in Gaelic – has taken on a renewed and profound sense of urgency in the context of climate crisis and ecological breakdown. Land is being bought and sold at an alarmingly rapid pace by

private finance, in part to plant trees in a deeply flawed and hasty attempt to offset the carbon emissions of global business through carbon credits – ultimately no more than an accounting exercise, much easier than reducing emissions at their source.[11] This ‘multi-billion-pound tsunami’ that is coming towards us runs the risk of ‘paralysing the movement for community landownership and permanently freezing both land use and inequitable ownership structures for future generations.’[12]

While no-one can argue with the need to plant more trees, the latest IPCC report (March 2023) shows that protecting existing forests is far more important than new plantations.[13] This is a point made by ecologist James Rainey and his work raising awareness of restoring the pine forests in the Highlands – an issue explored by Raghnaid Sandilands in her piece for A Fragile Correspondence.[14]



A Fragile Correspondence – Scotland + Venice, Loch Ness section_credit Robb Mcrae

Shifting Baselines

Few people realise that what we see in the Highlands is a highly degraded, nature-depleted and heavily managed landscape, far from the ‘natural wilderness’ many visitors come to expect. What is often considered ‘wild land’ is really once-peopled land and an artificial wilderness, owing more to recursive colonialisms than it does to wild nature.[15]

Perceptions of our Highland landscapes suffer from what ecologists call ‘shifting baseline syndrome,’[16] a term used to express how reference points – or baselines – for what is perceived as ‘normal’ change over time. It could be explained as a form of advancing environmental amnesia: without knowledge or direct experience of historical conditions, many people perceive severely degraded landscapes as the ‘natural’ state of things, even if habitats and biodiversity are a shadow of their former vitality.

Countless generations of humans before us had an intimate relationship with nature – with the trees and forests, the wind and tides, the river and rainfall, the changing of

the seasons. Natural cycles unfolded around us with profound meaning, bound up with a sense of community expressed in shared work and conviviality across the rhythm of the agricultural year. Culture and language is bound up in this relationship too. Research has shown that across the globe there is a causal link between the loss of culture and the loss of biodiversity; that is to say, cultural loss is ecological loss.[17] In many cases, damage to language and culture comes first, followed by a disregard or abandonment of local knowledge. This severance leads to a human-ecological disconnect, alienation and devastating environmental consequences.

Ways of Seeing

The dominant imagining the Highlands as a wild and people-less landscape began with the European Romantic imagination of the 18th and 19th centuries and its fascination with the aesthetics of the sublime and picturesque. A particular way of seeing – vast vistas, empty glens and dramatic castles – was sold to the world through popular literature, which in turn was entangled with the commercial beginnings of the tourism industry. A recogniseable visual culture was later developed by artists of the time; symbolic of this era is Landseer’s iconic painting, the ‘Monarch of the Glen’ (c.1851) which depicts a majestic stag against the grandeur of sublime misty mountains.[18]

This way of seeing is perpetuated into the present day through popular media and the gaze of a global tourist industry. Ultimately, it serves the interests of capital and landed power, obscuring a fraught and violent history of displacement and dispossession – a story with echoes and entanglements the world over. This gaze also blinds us to an alternative history embedded in the landscape: the histories and stories of a ‘once-forested, once-peopled, ecologically diverse landscape, known and named by people who had an intimate knowledge of the environment – at a time when forest ecologies were far richer.’[19]

A Fragile Correspondence – Scotland + Venice, Loch Ness section_credit Robb Mcrae

A’ Choille Ghiuthais (Caledonian Pine Forest)

The forest landscapes of Loch Ness were once connected to the ancient species-rich Caledonian Pine Forests, *A' Choille Ghiuthais* in Gaelic, which stretched from the Atlantic fringe on the West Coast to here in *An Gleann Mor* (the Great Glen fault) and the *Am Monadh Liath* (grey mountains) beyond. Carpeted by heather, blaeberry and glittering wood moss, this forest habitat was once home to an intricate web of life: capercaillie, crossbill, osprey, red squirrel, pine marten, beaver, boar, wildcat. Among the trees were great herds of grazing animals – including deer and wild cattle – preyed upon by the lynx, brown bear and wolf.

In the 10,000 years since the last ice-age, this forest has come and gone. Over time, the trees retreated, partly through natural processes. About 6,000 years ago, the climate became wetter, allowing peat bogs to form and causing forest cover to reduce. By the 1700s, the ancient forest remained in only the most remote places and much of the wildlife that relied upon these woods was lost either through hunting or loss of habitat.

Centuries of human use had a far more deleterious effect: felling trees to develop agricultural land, for fuel and to build ships and homes. Deforestation intensified in the 18th and 19th centuries following industrialisation, which heralded a new socio-economic order. Following the destruction of the clan system after the defeat of the Jacobite uprisings, land that had historically been stewarded by communities was expropriated by a rising class of gentry, enclosed and claimed as 'private property.' While landlords perceived this as 'improvement', the Gaels called it *na Fuadaichean*, the Clearances: the forced eviction of people from their homes to make way for the commercial farming of sheep. The consequence was severe ecological degradation alongside profound cultural loss.

The rapid increase in sheep grazing at this time compromised natural woodland succession. Individual trees, large enough to be immune to grazing, would no longer have competition for light, maturing into the iconic silhouette of the lone Scots pine we see today. These geriatric trees, aged 200 – 300 years old, are now reaching the end of their lives and dying, with no young saplings to take their place. These so-called 'Granny pines' are an indicator of an ecosystem out of balance – a living link to the Clearances in a landscape of great sadness and loss. [20]

By the late 19th century, a fashion for all things tartan prompted those who could afford it to emulate Queen Victoria in buying up sporting estates. An international elite pays large sums of money to shoot deer and grouse, which means it is economically profitable to keep numbers artificially high on your private land – but what is the real cost? Along with the acceleration of biodiversity loss, deer now represent a hundred-year-problem, with overgrazing rendering natural regeneration of native woodland almost impossible. [21]

In the twentieth century, the World Wars took a heavy toll on the remains of the native forests, and the intensive expansion of monocrop conifers which followed have left native woodlands in a parlous state.

Only scattered, isolated fragments of our ancient forest ecologies remain – in remote corries, gullies and along stream courses, where sheep and deer cannot reach. An ecological memory of what we have lost haunts the landscape still: the absented presence of old pine stumps emerging from the peat hags.

Monoculture

An aerial view of Loch Ness today reveals a mosaic of woodland habitats, dominated by dark blocks of monocrop forestry, a legacy of post-war plantation. Forests that

were felled during wartime – most of them in Scotland – had to be replaced. Policy makers envisaged a fast and large-scale expansion of afforestation, building up a strategic reserve of timber, and reducing timber imports.[22]

At that time, the Forestry Commission was desperate to acquire land, no matter how marginal, to meet the needs of this large planting programme. When land was acquired, farmers removed their sheep flocks – often giving up common grazing rights – and it was fenced off. Animals which might damage new trees – rabbits, hares, black grouse – were killed by trappers. Near monocultures of exotic conifers such as lodgepole pine and sitka spruce were selected for their ability to produce timber from upland soils. Sitka soon became the overwhelmingly dominant plantation species, quick to produce and economical to harvest.

From 1960 to 2000, forestry cover increased in Scotland by 11%.[23] However, as the first post-war acquisitions grew into forests, the public voiced their dislike. Visual changes in upland landscapes were felt keenly; young plantations were seen as 'uniform dark green blankets.' [24] The apparent ecological sterility of maturing plantations was compared unfavourably with familiar broadleaved woodlands.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, this model of forestry was seriously challenged. High-profile, widely publicised campaigns, such as the RSPB campaign against forestry in the Flow Country – the 'largest expanse of blanket peatland in all of Europe' – brought the issue into public consciousness.[25] This area – now nominated for UNESCO world heritage status[26] – was being drained and ploughed by forestry companies whose managers were purchasing estate after estate to turn more land over to plantation in pursuit of generous tax concessions available to investors. The question of whether or not these trees would reach maturity was immaterial, as was the fact these individuals were profiting financially from the destruction of a globally scarce environmental resource.[27]

Along with the push for land reform to remove the outdated and unfair land law that existed in Scotland, activists were inspired to push for greater community involvement in local woodland management. Organisations such as Reforesting Scotland appeared, concerned with issues of land degradation, rural depopulation, local democracy, woodland management and ecological restoration.[28]

Abriachan Forest

It was around this time, in 1998, that Abriachan Forest Trust first took ownership of their land near Loch Ness, with the purchase of 534 hectares of largely monoculture sitka plantation and open hill ground from Forest Enterprise. The primary motivation was to ensure public access:

"What they didn't want was for it to be sold to a forester or developer who would put locks on the gates. We'd seen it happen in so many other places – that was obviously the danger."

"We had to make a case for why this patch of forestry would be better off in the community's hands rather than elsewhere. For us it was about biodiversity, it was about education, it was about amenity access and it was about local employment."

"The early work days were full of good, hearty, exhausting activity which was all to do with creating paths mostly, and tree planting. These were community events, and there was a job for everyone." [29]

Today, after twenty-five years of careful stewardship – thinning, harvesting, replanting – the forest has been transformed from into a diverse and regenerating

woodland. It is home to an increasing variety of species; woodland birds, pine martens, red squirrels, otters, butterflies, damselflies and dragonflies. Income from careful and continued sustainable commercial use of the forest is re-invested in woodland management, in community and public-benefit activities such as outdoor learning and recreation. With control over the land, they are able to pursue their aims without needing permission from any landowner.[30]

Rewilding / Ath-fhiathachadh

Today, many other and varied efforts are being made to restore the ancient woodlands around Loch Ness-side. Individuals and organisations – representing wide perspectives on the land and its possible uses – have acquired land and have placed woodland restoration at the heart of their renewal efforts.

In recent years, the language and discourse of ‘rewilding’ has been enthusiastically adopted in certain quarters. For example, Aldourie Castle on the loch’s south-eastern shore – one of thirteen estates owned by the Danish billionaire Anders Polvsen, Scotland’s largest private landowner – is part of a ‘200 year vision to rewild the land and restore our parts of the Scottish Highlands to their former natural splendour.’[31] Overlooked by the mountain *Meall Fuar Mhonaidh* (hill of the cold peat bogs), the 1200 acre Bunloit Estate was purchased in 2020 by entrepreneur Jeremy Legget as a ‘flagship rewilding project,’ financially incentivising nature restoration.[32]

Rewilding, however, is a contested term in the context of the *Gàidhealtachd*. It can strike a discord in those communities where the historical injustices of the Clearances are still felt, especially where land considered appropriate for ‘rewilding’ is actually once-peopled land. As Fraser MacDonald writes, ‘it’s not just a question of who owns wild Scotland, but of the way that wildness is conceived and framed.’[33] The concept of the ‘Green laird’ (Scots: /ˈlɛərd / – the owner of a large, long-established Scottish estate) is a loaded term that has made it into mainstream discourse – speaking from the fear and suspicion that rewilding projects will perpetuate existing and unjust patterns of absentee land ownership, with little care or thought for local communities who live nearby.[34] The accusation here is that rewilding becomes ‘just another form of land colonialism,’[35] carrying on the history of exploitation of the Highlands.[36]

Rewilding has many interpretations. Gaelic writer and broadcaster Roddy Maclean argues that the word, and the concept, can sit comfortably within a Gaelic worldview, translated from English into Gaelic as *ath-fhiathachadh*.[37] This approach to rewilding acknowledges the profound interdependency between biological and cultural diversity, or what we might call ‘biolinguistic diversity,’ and foregrounds traditional ecological knowledge – or the ‘wisdom that sits in places.’ This culturally-sensitive approach to rewilding is the approach increasingly taken by the conservation charity Trees for Life, who opened the doors to the world’s first ‘Rewilding Centre’ at Dundreggan, south of Loch Ness, in Spring 2023. In their exhibition, they state:

‘Both Gaelic and our native forests evolved in response to Scotland’s environment. Over time, both were diminished to the point of facing extinction. Now, as we revitalise the landscape, more people are embracing the language that grew out of it. *Ann an ath-fhiathachadh, tha ath-ùrachadh* (in rewilding there is renewal).’

This approach is not altogether new. In Abriachan, the Forest Trust has never described their work as ‘rewilding,’ preferring to talk about regeneration and ‘nature recovery.’ Gaelic has played an important role here since the beginning. Place names, found on old maps, can tell us about the biodiversity in the past and be a guide in the restoration of habitats for the future. For example, as Christine Matheson tells us, *Allt*

Lòn na Fiodhaige means 'the burn of the meadow of the bird cherry' – knowledge which guided the Trust when replanting this riparian area. The deciduous trees dropping leaves into the water will improve the overall quality of the ecosystem.

Other names relating to trees in the area include:

Allt Coire Shalachaidh (the stream of the corrie of the willow)
Coire Shalachaidh (the corrie of the willow)
Loch Creag an t-Seilich (the loch of the crag of the willow)
*Doire Mhò*r (large oak grove)
Achadh a' Chuilinn (field of holly)

Caochan a' Chall (streamlet of the hazel)
Allt Lòn a' Ghiubhais (the stream of the meadow of the pines)
Allt Ceann na Coille (the stream of the head of the forest)

To our Highland ancestors, there was no lochan nor hillock too wee, no matter how insignificant in our modern eyes, that did not merit a name. Many features were named after birds, animals and plants. As Raghnaid Sandilands writes, 'Gaelic, like all indigenous languages… has so much to say in terms of seeing and naming and knowing the natural world; the detail speaks of an intimacy and care.'[39]

Nature runs strongly throughout Gaelic culture, woven through place names, folklore, song and poetry. Historian Christopher Smout talks about finding, in the Gaelic poetry of *Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir* (Duncan Ban MacIntyre, 1724 – 1812), the the 'roots of an indigenous Scottish Green consciousness,'[40] which others have described as the cultural residue of an 'archaic ecological outlook that does not demarcate human beings from the rest of the natural order.'[41]

Folklore remembers the demise of the ancient forests in the story of *Dubh a' Ghiuthais* (black pine) which recounts the burning of the woods – a folk legend so ubiquitous it attests to the central and symbolic role of woodland in Gaelic culture and consciousness. It also reveals 'an innate understanding of environmental issues, since the loss of trees was interpreted as an ecological disaster.[42]

As Michael Newton writes, the tree is one of the most ancient and potent symbols to appear in Gaelic literature, 'entwined in cosmology, the representation of social structures, the natural world and literacy itself.' [43] The earliest alphabet and writing system, *ogham* – tally-like inscriptions which appear on stone monuments and artefacts by the 5th century – was connected, for mnemonic purposes, to the archaic names for trees: *ailm* (pine), *beith* (birch), *coll* (hazel), *dair* (oak).'

In early Gaelic poetry, individuals are likened to trees, and by extension, the hierarchy of the forest is often used as a symbol for social order. The vitality and diversity of the woodland is intertwined with the flourishing of culture and community – a metaphor which speaks to contemporary understandings of ecological and social interdependency.

Gaels were also keenly aware of the ecology of the native tree species, demonstrated by the following proverb which describes the habitat in which each tree grew:

Seileach nan allt
'S calltainn nan creag
Fearna an lòin
'S beithe nan eas;
Uinnsean an dubhair

‘S darach na grèine
Leamhan a’ bhruthaich
‘S iubhar an leana.

The willow of the streams
And the hazel of the craigs
The alder of the bogs
And the birch of the waterfalls;
The ash of the shade
And the oak of the sun
The elm of the slope
And the yew of the meadow. [44]

The Forest Commons

It is perhaps not at all surprising that trees and forests should have loomed large in Gaelic culture and consciousness from the very earliest times. Historically, woodland was a vital source of raw materials – for construction, fuel, craft, weaponry, medicine, food, ritual. As historian Jim Hunter writes, in the early Gaelic law tracts – the first to be set out in any European language other than Greek or Latin – woodlands and other natural resources were seen and managed as a common resource that belonged to all inhabitants of the *tuath*, the basic unit of that society.[45]

While this early Gaelic society was very hierarchical, a marked distinction was made between what had been artificially created and what existed naturally. While it was unlawful to take from your neighbour’s field, it was perfectly acceptable to take supplies of timber and other commodities from a woodland, provided that attention and care was paid to the need to ensure its sustainability for future generations.[46]

The simple idea that natural resources might belong to the generality of people in a given locality, rather than to privileged individuals, is one that lingers in cultural consciousness. The folk memory of this way of life is captured in a proverb defending actions which contemporary law would regard as theft of private property:

‘Fiadh à fireach, geug à coille, bradan à linne – trì mèirle às nach do ghabh a’ Ghàidheal riamh nàire’

(a deer from the rough ground, a branch from a wood and a salmon from a pool – three thefts for which the Gael never felt shame)

Capitalism has led us to believe that only privately owned resources can be effectively managed. The term ‘tragedy of the commons,’ popularised in the 1960s, captures the pervasive belief that efforts to manage resources as a commons are doomed to failure, highlighting the conflict between individual and collective rationality.[47] This is not the case, as many examples around the world show.

The ‘commons’ is a social form that has long lived in the shadows of market culture, expressing a very old idea: that some forms of wealth belong to all of us, and that these community resources must be actively protected and managed for the good of all.[48] As the global movement to ‘reclaim the commons’ shows – reclaiming what has been lost through the enclosure and ongoing capitalist appropriation, privatisation and commodification – people across the world are re-discovering old or creating new and often pioneering models that work for the good of all.

This includes, of course, the movement for community ownership of land and resources in Scotland, and the story of Abriachan. As commons scholar David Bollier writes, ‘a commons arises whenever a given community decides that it wishes to

manage a resource in a collective manner, with special regard for equitable access, use and sustainability.’[49]

People Belong to Places

The modern assumption, then, that it is normal for a single individual to own a large area of land – a hill or a forest, perhaps – contrasts starkly with the Highland worldview in which ‘people belong to places, rather than places belong to people.’[50] Gaelic culture expresses a fundamentally different way of relating to the land, or *dùthaich*. This is perhaps best expressed in the concept of *dùthchas*, which encompasses the idea of ecological interrelationship between land, all living things, people, language and culture – a concept familiar to many of the world’s indigenous cultures. It can be understood as a cultural, ethical and reciprocal relationship with place, speaking both to a sense of belonging to and responsible stewardship of the land for future generations, acknowledging that humans are a fundamental part of the ecology of a place.

Dùthchas is also richly associated with the concept of *dualchas,* often poorly translated as ‘heritage.’ It constitutes what might be better understood as traditional ecological knowledge, encompassing a cultural inheritance in the form of traditions, practices and shared knowledge deeply rooted in the landscape. These three Gaelic words – *dùthchas, dùthaich and dualchas* – are all connected: together they form a matrix in which land, language and people – *an tir, an canan ’s na daoine* – are inseparable.

Historically, *dùthchas* was a customary law – a hereditary collective claim or right to land not subject to tenure, lease or rent. Such a claim was lived out through shared stewardship of natural resources and bound up in relationship with others. In this sense, the relational concept of *dùthchas* challenges the very notion of private ownership, completely at odds with the idea that an individual can acquire ‘rights’ to the land based on greed rather than need.’[51]

Testament to the tenacity of this deeply held conviction, claims of right to the land in the name of *dùthchas* were given legislative effect in the Crofters Act of 1886 following the land agitation and crofters’ resistance of the late nineteenth century, where a series of demanding security of tenure.[52] While this legislation did not restore lost lands, it was a remarkable achievement, a ‘watershed moment that shaped subsequent history of land and people and the ongoing process of land reform as we know it today.’[53]

The Future

Despite recent and positive changes to land legislation, the Land Question *or Ceist an Fhearainn* is still a vital one.[54] Land use is changing rapidly as we begin to address the massive climate and biodiversity challenges that we all urgently face. As Alastair McIntosh writes, ‘the pace of developments around “rewilding” and “carbon offsetting” as relatively new entrants in public discourse…can affect land reform and community options for the future.’ [56] Speculative investors are buying land in anticipation that carbon prices will rise, which inflates the price of land and may become a fresh driver of upheaval, disempowerment and depopulation.

Land reform and increasing forest cover are two competing polices. In March this year, NatureScot – Scotland’s government body responsible for the country’s natural heritage – announced a £2 billion private finance initiative (PFI) positioning Scotland as a ‘world leader in nature restoration through natural capital investment.’ [55]. The main stated driver for private investors is the sale of carbon credits for ‘offsetting’

greenhouse gas emissions through planting trees. This is not careful culturally-sensitive regeneration of our forests, but rather an extractive model mediated by private finance and designed to meet the ends of economic growth.

Private money means private control. Only with land reform and the reform of ownership patterns does it become possible to envision a more diverse pattern of ecological land management practices that might, in the words of historian Jim Hunter, ‘turn around those processes which have done so much damage both to this area’s people and to its natural environment.’[57]

Community landowners see people and their interests ‘as part of the natural order and landscape, every bit as much as a diverse range of plants and other species should be.’[58]

In correspondence with the landscape of Abriachan and its inhabitants, we learn that community ownership has the potential to reclaim hopeful, local, possible futures. Yet, as the audio piece concludes, community ownership cannot be taken for granted; the case must continuously be made and a new generation must step up to take on the mantle of collective stewardship into the future. Writer Katherine Stewart, patron of the Abriachan Forest Trust its early days, speaks to the joy of the social bonds of conviviality:

‘The feeling of solidarity can still be real…The old sense of community expressed in shared effort is growing steadily and leading to a renewed appreciation of all that working in close partnership with the environment really means.’[59]

When both our social and ecological relationships are convivial, we build together deeply interconnected, thriving places. The story of Abriachan is the story of a community built around a woodland, and an ongoing story of what can be restored – both in terms of biodiversity and community – through acts of care, connection and taking agency in a place. It is a story of baselines shifting in a positive direction –with each new generation encountering a more enriched ecology than what came before. As Christine Matheson reflects,

“Just listen to the birdsong now; as I was saying, when I came here first, you wouldn’t hear a thing.”

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[25] Hunter, J. (2014, 1995.) p200; RSPB. (1987). ‘Forestry in the Flows of Caithness and Sutherland’
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[33] MacDonald, F. (2021). ‘Wild Beasts’ London Review of Books Vol 33 No. 18:

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n18/fraser-macdonald/diary
[34] See Meikle M. (2023) 'Green Lairds?' in *Reforesting Scotland Magazine* issue 67, Spring/Summer
[35] Legget, J. (2023). Highlands Rewilding: governance and land colonialism. See: https://www.highlandsrewilding.co.uk/blog/highlands-rewilding-governance-and-land-colonialism
[36] This issue is explored by Alastair McIntosh in an essay on rewilding and community which reflects on the tensions or distinction between visions for the future that are capital-driven and those that are community or politically-driven. See McIntosh, A. (2023). The Question of Community and "Rewilding". Bella Caledonia https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2023/01/31/the-question-of-community-and-rewilding
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[55] NatureScot (2023) '£2billion private finance pilot potential 'vital step in restoring Scotland's woodlands' See: https://presscentre.nature.scot/news/gbp-2billion-private-finance-pilot-potential-vital-step-in-restoring-scotlands-woodlands
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rewilding-2017-2/
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Antoine Bisset 24th May 2023 at 3

First Class! Land reform required, so that locals (not local gentry,) have some control. (Also for fisher folk to control the seas.). “Carbon c
is a blatant fraud. We won’t shoot your grannie, instead we are shooting you grandad.

Meg Macleod 24th May 2023 at 3

If the W.H.O and world economic forum have their way we shall soon have to fight for the right to think…
Controlling the land..controlling the mind…
A BIRD'S EYE VIEW SEES SAME DARK FORCES AT WORK on an inherited agenda of inequality and power.

Wul 25th May 2023 at 5

Excellent piece.

There is something deeply troubling about making the land a vehicle, a legal-financial instrument, that legitimises yet more fossil-fuel burning (by the rich). It is a sick “solution” dreamed up by people who have lost their minds to greed.

Wul 25th May 2023 at 6

People do belong to places. And people who claim not to belong to any place are a danger to all living things that do.

Paddy Farrington 26th May 2023 at 10

Wonderful piece, thank you.

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