

Case Study

Restoring an ancient woodland in community ownership

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Aigas Woods is a relic of a once dense, much larger, pine forest near Inverness.

After several years of hard work, it is now owned by the local community and is being restored.



Aigas community consultation walk

WTML/Alison Smith

Records of early woodland planting from the 1700s make it clear that Aigas has been actively managed for at least 300 years. During the 19th century, the woods were partly landscaped to create an attractive woodland recreation area, a popular style with the Victorian tourist industry.

There is still an extensive network of paths visible, which are largely overgrown and in need of repair, and an old stone arched bridge. The wood once boasted a summer house with excellent views of the gorge, sparsely covered in gnarled, twisted oaks clinging to the rock face, but today there are no remains of this hidden retreat.

Most of the prime trees on the site were felled during the First and Second World Wars to help supply the country's huge timber demands.

During the 1960s the Forestry Commission planted up the most accessible parts of the site with commercial, close-set rows of Scots pine and other conifers, such as larch, Douglas fir and spruces. However, due to access challenges and poor timber markets, the wood has been largely neglected over the last few decades.

Community ownership

Aigas Woods is surrounded by a strong community who were keen to take up the challenge of owning and managing the site. In 2009 members of this community began a six year process of planning and fundraising, and in March 2015, they finally acquired the site.

Practical support and funding was offered through the Scottish Land Fund (SLF), funded by the Scottish Government, in partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Big Lottery Fund.

Community ownership of the wood is extremely beneficial to its sustainable future. Management access to the land around Aigas has been made possible by local landowners who are part of the community group and were involved in the purchase.

Difficult issues, such as deer management, can be overcome with community backing. Equally the ability to leave a lasting legacy in the area has been amplified by the involvement of the whole community including local schoolchildren.



Conservation and commerce

The funding package at Aigas has paid for a two-year development officer post as well as the woodland itself. A management plan is being drawn up, which will include developing a sustainable social enterprise to benefit the community and fund a more permanent post.

A large part of the wood is dominated by un-thinned, dark, plantation forestry, but there are some remaining pockets of native woodland ground flora and also some broadleaf trees. Wood sorrel, bluebells, dog's mercury with blaeberry and heather have all been identified, as well as aspen, birch, oak and hazel trees, around rocky crags, down streamsides, and in the gorge.

Some of the scots pine stands are also taking on a more semi natural feel as they mature with old granny pine remnants and scattered decaying large stumps from previous felling.

These remnants create a good foundation for a developing, sustainable woodland. The income from gradually thinning and felling the commercial conifer timber stands will in turn, provide funds for the restoration work and help with local training and employment opportunities.

Restoring the heritage

The community plans to restore the forest to native woodland. Where possible, restoration management will be carried out under a continuous cover forestry regime to maintain woodland conditions and allow natural regeneration from the seed of surviving native trees.

Some clear-felling will be inevitable due to the steep terrain and lack of previous thinning. In most instances these areas will be restocked with native species.

Some of the Scots pine trees on the site have distinct veteran tree characteristics. These can be allowed to develop a more open, classic granny pine shape, in keeping with the traditional image of Caledonian pine forest. Improving the structure, age and species diversity of the forest will benefit the local population of red squirrels.

The vision for Aigas

The long-term goal of the community at Aigas is to create a thriving wood, balancing the needs of wildlife and local people. The forest will offer a home for a diverse range of wildlife and a place for social activities. Aigas will also produce an income for reinvestment, training and employment, and support activity in the wider glen. It is an ambitious plan, but one the whole community is committed to delivering.

How the Trust can help

Bringing damaged ancient woodland back into restoration requires careful management. Thanks to funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Woodland Trust is offering landowners and managers professional support and training to sustainably manage and restore their woodlands.

If you own a plantation on ancient woodland site, we can help you discover its history and provide independent and practical advice on topics including:

- How restoration can complement your woodland business and interests
- How restoration can support forestry certification
- Making the most of grant funding

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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