

Realising the cultural value of a Caledonian pine forest

What are the cultural values and meanings we associate with the native Caledonian pine forests of Scotland? How can they be realised in ways that support biodiversity conservation and public engagement? Such questions formed the basis of an inclusive participatory process, led by two environmental artists, focusing on the Black Wood of Rannoch, Perthshire. The project brought together diverse interests, and produced several analytical and creative outputs: reports, articles, blogs, maps, sculptures and videos.



"People have always been part of the Black Wood, and always will be."

(Workshop participant)

Photo © Collins & Goto Studio, 2013

Background

Between 2013 and 2015, environmental artists Tim Collins and Reiko Goto led a series of events and discussions, in collaboration with Forest Research (FR), to help realise existing and new cultural values associated with the Caledonian pine forests of Scotland. The project focused on the Black Wood of Rannoch in Perthshire, and involved a diverse range of partners: Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), the Landscape Research Group (LRG), the Perth and Kinross Countryside Trust (PKCT), local artists and residents in Kinloch Rannoch, and academics from the arts and humanities.

Objectives

The research aimed to:

- Facilitate an inclusive participatory process to explore the cultural values associated with the Black Wood of Rannoch and the Caledonian forests more broadly, and how these are understood at a local and national level.
- Identify options for future management and public engagement that could enhance understanding of the Black Wood and its wider cultural landscape.

Methods

- A series of artists' residencies, guided forest walks, interdisciplinary exchanges, meetings, public debates, a two-day 'future forest' workshop held in Kinloch Rannoch in November 2013, and an arts exhibition and seminar series 'Sylva Caledonia' held at Summerhall, Edinburgh, in Spring 2015.
- The process was supported by research into the woodland ecology and history; translations of Gaelic place names; reviews of environmental aesthetics and cultural ecosystem services; and the production and use of sculpture and video to prompt new ways of thinking about the forest.

Findings

- Discussions about the management of native pinewoods have tended to take place within a relatively narrow community of land-owners, foresters and conservationists. Biodiversity values have often been prioritised in decision-making. Historically, this has protected sites like the Black Wood from ecologically destructive interventions. But it might also have constrained how cultural benefits are understood, valued and experienced.
- Workshop participants reminded us that the forests are of national cultural importance: as a tangible embodiment of bio-cultural heritage; as a location for aesthetic and spiritual experiences and inspiration for artistic expression, and as places which people identify with and feel a sense of attachment and belonging. Despite this, public awareness is modest, and cultural representations of the forests are limited in the media, museums, galleries, libraries and botanic gardens across Scotland.
- The project helped to resolve tensions between local interests, who united around their opposition to any intrusive developments in the Black Wood. It demonstrated how an artist-led process can encourage 'cultural ecosystem services' to be explored more thoroughly and imaginatively than might be the case for a process led by 'neutral' facilitators.

Recommendations

Workshop participants proposed several initiatives for the Black Wood and wider Rannoch region that could enhance cultural values in ways that support a policy of biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration. These included:

- 'Deep mapping' of cultural sites and features, combining local and expert knowledge, meanings and values to inform forest landscape planning.
- A long-distance 'Caledonian Way' trail defined by Gaelic cultural themes including the life and poetry of Duncan Ban MacIntyre (1724-1812).
- Ecological, arts and humanities residencies to recover lost forest culture and explore synergies between conservation and public engagement.

Partners

Collins & Goto Studio, FR, LRG, FCS, PKCT.

For further information contact:
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Funding/Support

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Reports and Publications

To date, outputs include:

Collins, T., Goto, R. and Edwards, D. (2014). *Future Forest: The Black Wood, Rannoch, Scotland*. LRG & FR. 51pp.

Kenter, J. et al. (2014). *Shared, Plural and Cultural Values: A Handbook for Decision-Makers*. UK National Ecosystem Assessment Follow-on phase. UNEP-WCMC: Cambridge, UK.