

Regeneration, renewal and reforestation

Alan Carter reflects on the metamorphosis of his childhood stomping ground from a mining-scarred, blighted landscape to a reforested and revived place where people may thrive.

Around the time I was born, the local blaes quarry closed, so the new ecosystem that established on the site and I grew up together. As a child, it became my favourite place to play. Luckily, my parents never knew half of what I got up to – surfing down unconsolidated spoil slopes, wading in the intermittent ponds and conducting hydro-engineering experiments in the burn.

Looking back, that time also shaped my instincts as an ecologist. Succession: the way that mosses, then foxgloves, then willowherb, then brambles, then whins, then birch and willow spread across the loose rock. Hydrology: the way the burn meandered, braided, flooded and sometimes disappeared altogether in its shattered plain.

As a child, you don't question how the landscape you know came to be: it's just how things have always been. But I now know that I had played in a moderately recent scene of devastation. The quarries, the abandoned yards, the pit bings, the railway lines and derelict canal – all bore witness to activity and industry in the relatively recent past.

It is the same with the land we all grew up in. On holiday in the Highlands, we enjoyed the majestically desolate, open scenery of Scotland. This was how it had always been, no?

Well, no. As my love of trees pushed me towards conservation volunteering and a forestry degree, I began to learn the

history of deforestation that created this iconic landscape. The signs were less obvious than towering bings and rotting rail bridges, but there all the same: pollen grains and tree stumps in peat bogs, historical records, *ghiuthais* and *darroch* in place names where no pine or oak

Urban communities are taking over unloved land to create vital greenspaces.

remain. Aldo Leopold wrote that "to be an ecologist is to live alone in a world of hurts". At least nowadays he would have had some company.

In time, I moved away from North Lanarkshire and took my eye off the changes in the landscape of my youth. I settled down to a living planting trees in Aberdeenshire and began to think of woodland creation as a matter of spades and rabbit mesh, stock and deer fences, open hillsides and planting grants, not of seeds blowing over broken rock.

Then, not long ago, I walked up the hill behind our house with my father. It was an unusually clear day and he started to point out the new woods in the Kelvin Valley below. Bings had morphed into nature reserves, fields into new community woodlands. Old yards and landfill sites had grown trees of their own accord. Cumbernauld, famous for its Carbuncle Award, had another story going on with a circle of well-managed woods around it.

Among the trees, humans seemed to be thriving. The reforestation was very much part and parcel of the wider renewal and regeneration of the

area. A network of new paths linked the new woods and other attractions. Running through it all, the Forth and Clyde Canal, once an industrial highway, then a derelict eyesore and now a major attraction, seemed to encapsulate the story.

Perhaps because the fields above our house remain a "sheep-bitten desert", I had

missed what was unfolding in the valley below. There was a lot more green down there nowadays.

When we talk of reforestation, there is a temptation to think of vast planting schemes in remote Highland glens, but there is a second story of reforestation going on. Expertise is quietly being built up in the restoration of devastated land. Councils and agencies have caught on to the value of woodland around towns. Urban communities are taking over unloved land to create vital greenspaces.

The theme of this issue is Regeneration, Renewal and Reforestation. At this year's RS Gathering, this second story of post-industrial reforestation is told and celebrated in the transformed surroundings of my childhood, the Kelvin Valley.

The annual RS Gathering takes place from 7 to 9 October 2011. For last-minute bookings, phone 0131 220 2500 or see www.reforestingscotland.org

Alan Carter, a forester and Director of Reforesting Scotland, convenes this year's Gathering. Email dalancarter@yahoo.co.uk

Right: Willowherb, an attractive coloniser of disturbed sites. Photo: Flickr user D. H. Wright used under a Creative Commons Attribution license.

