

Reforestation Scotland visit to Ardvar SAC woodland, Quinag estate.

The visit was hosted by Don O'Driscoll from the John Muir Trust (JMT), the owners of Quinag estate. The woodland feature of the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) spans both Quinag and Ardvar estates with only a small area in the east (7% of the total woodland area) located in Quinag estate. The SAC woodland is defined as a western, acidic oak wood at the northern extremity of its range. We first visited a part of the woodland that is dominated by birch and lacks structural diversity, with no understorey and no recent tree recruitment. It was obviously heavily browsed by deer. With reduced browsing there is potential for other tree species e.g. rowan, holly and hazel, to increase in abundance and for the woodland to spread beyond its current extent. We saw a patch of young birches above heather height that had been browsed heavily every year for several years to the extent that they were unable to progress and develop into young trees. We then went on to look at another part of the woodland that is on richer soils. Here, on the lower slopes the woodland is dominated by hazel with birch and rowan. Further up the slope, where the soils are thinner, birch takes over dominance from hazel. Aspen, holly, oak and wych elm occur occasionally throughout the woodland. All tree species are being prevented from regenerating by heavy deer browsing. If the browsing pressure were reduced, regeneration would be possible and, in particular, the rarer and more palatable tree species (aspen, oak, wych elm) that distinguish this type of woodland on relatively rich soils from more acidic, and much commoner, birch woods, would have the potential to increase in number.

JMT would like to bring red deer numbers down to encourage woodland regeneration and bring the SAC into favourable condition. However, two of the neighbouring estates; Ardvar, which is privately owned, and North Assynt, owned by the Assynt Crofters Trust, both carry out sport shooting of stags and are worried that a heavy cull will reduce the number of stags available for let stalking. Under a previous deer control agreement (made possible under section 7 of the Deer Act), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) set cull targets for Ardvar and Quinag estate (The Assynt Crofters' Trust declined to take part). Licences for out-of-season shooting were not granted. This failed to reduce the impact on the woodland. SNH has therefore suggested that a further deer control agreement is drawn up whereby the land owners will be paid to erect deer fences around the most vulnerable parts of the SAC woodland.

We discussed the seemingly perennial issue of the apparent conflict of interest between estates run primarily for nature conservation, where reducing deer density and impacts is a priority, and those where let stalking of stags takes place. The latter estates usually want to see as many stags as possible on their land during the stag stalking season (1st July to 20th October). Although the SAC area on Quinag is a stag wintering ground and JMT currently do not have a licence to shoot deer out of season, neighbouring estates are worried that reducing hind densities (the hind season is 21 October to 15 February) will reduce the number of stags born and so reduce the number of stags available to be shot. This does not take account, however, of the likely effect of the increased quality and quantity of forage that will be available to the deer if numbers are reduced. This is likely to result in an increase in the size and fertility of hinds, an increase in the ratio of stag : hind calves born (hinds are more likely to produce hind calves under poor forage conditions) and an increase in the size, and possibly also antler quality, of the remaining stags. It is also possible that, if heavy stalking pressure were to take place on Quinag during the stag stalking season, stags would cross the march into Ardvar or North Assynt where the pressure would be lower. There is a possibility, however, that even with heavy culling of deer during the culling seasons, damage to the SAC would still be unacceptable since browsing on the woodland is likely to be heaviest in winter i.e. outside

the culling season for stags. Alternatively, disturbance due to hind culling may be sufficient to keep stags out of the woodlands in winter.

There was a feeling that erecting deer fences around small parts of the SAC would not be a good use of public money and might set a precedent that would be followed in other parts of Scotland. Although fences might allow trees to regenerate in a small area during their, at best, twenty year lifetime, once the fences came down, deer impacts would increase to the previous high levels preventing any further tree regeneration or woodland expansion and impacting heavily on other elements of the SAC woodland that contribute to its special quality and condition e.g. the climbing, and other preferred, plant species.

We concluded that more dialogue is needed between the different estate owners. Monitoring of the numbers of deer present on each estate at different times of the year, of the population recruitment rate (ratio of calves to hinds in late winter) and of the size and quality of shot hinds and stags would allow all concerned to track the impact of any increased cull. The possibility was also discussed of encouraging access to the woodland and, in particular, walkers with dogs, since regular disturbance might help to reduce browsing on trees, especially if deer numbers were also brought down. Ultimately, an increased cover of woodland and an increase in the number of the rarer tree species, together with reduced deer browsing across the site, is likely to lead not just to improved biodiversity but also to improved soil quality, increased shelter and better quality forage for deer and domestic stock and the potential, in the future, to have a timber resource that could be carefully exploited at a low level for local use.

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