





Dick Balharry: a life remembered

To celebrate the life and work of Dick Balharry MBE FRSGS, Jill Matthews charts how Dick made his dream of restoring Scotland's wet deserts into reality.

".....ever since, I have seen the eagle as the best living barometer for the quality of wild land in Scotland. Where the eagle lives, survives and thrives, then that for me is wild land, rather than any academic, hatched up concoction."

Dick loved wildlife – all wildlife. He had a pet raven, cared for red deer calves, filmed wild cats, brought a pine marten into the office, planted Scotland's native trees in his garden and shot deer. He was passionate about wild Scotland; he was charismatic, he was great fun, told brilliant stories, and chuckled a lot. In his time with Nature Conservancy, Nature Conservancy Council and Scottish Natural Heritage he worked tirelessly to revitalise wildlife in the Highlands. He has left his mark on the landscape for all to see.

Early dreams

In the 1950s, Frank Fraser Darling described the Highlands as a

'devastated landscape' and 'wet desert'. These were provocative words for many, but a clarion call for a few. Dick Balharry was one of the few who believed the land could be restored if managed differently.

Fast forward sixty plus years to the present day, and thousands of hectares of wet desert remain, with unrepentant landowners and impotent policy makers – it dismays me to see land so abused. But there are rays of hope; in a few places the wet desert is slowly and carefully being nurtured back to healthy woodland. The transformation is being brought about as a result of the unstinting efforts of visionaries like Dick and others. Dick dreamed wild Scotland could be different and he turned his dream into reality. He fought hard to change how land was managed, and to change the hearts and minds of those who poured scorn on his ideas. The land being nurtured back to health is a tiny fraction of the Highlands, and long term success will take more than a lifetime, so it is very much work 'in progress' and painstakingly slow. Today the approach he pioneered –

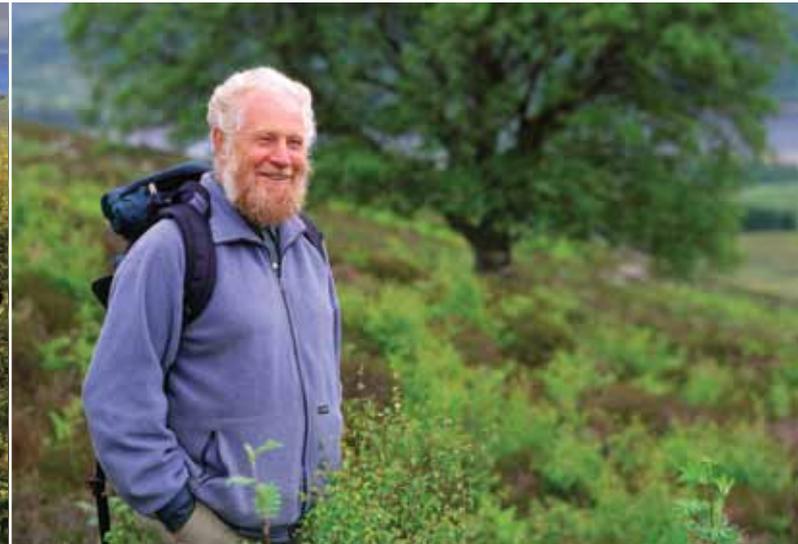
more trees with fewer and bigger red deer – is no longer exclusively used by bearded weirdo wardens on nature reserves; slowly the idea is gaining ground among more traditional land managers. It is not easy nor quick and there is a long, long way to go, but let us hope a lot more wet desert can be restored to a healthier wild Scotland in the 21st century.

Significantly Dick spent his early working years as a gamekeeper and stalker, but he spent much of his working life managing nature reserves. He devoted many years to restoring nature on two National Nature Reserves Beinn Eighe and Creag Meagaidh. The story of the early years of Beinn Eighe is all about growing trees by excluding deer; while the story of Creag Meagaidh is about managing the trees and deer together.

Beinn Eighe: trees without deer

In 1951, the Scottish Director of the Nature Conservancy (NC) bought Beinn Eighe from a willing seller. He paid £4,000 for 4,320 hectares - less than £1 per hectare. The GB Director was not impressed with this bargain. He was actually very annoyed by the

Clockwise from left: Dick Balharry at Beinn Eighe; Scots pine woodland above Loch Maree with Slioch beyond, Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve. The footpath in Coire Ardair, Creag Meagaidh NNR, East Highland Area. Photos: SNH, Lorne Gill/SNH.



waste of money because he wanted to buy 290 hectares of woodland only, not the mountain as well. Over the years this investment has proved very worthwhile for those interested in nature. Owning the land meant the NC could use the reserve as an 'outdoor lab', allowing scientists and wardens to experiment with different management techniques.

Dick arrived at Beinn Eighe in 1962 as its second warden. He was given the job because he could shoot deer and milk a cow! He managed the reserve for a decade. At the time all NC staff were inspired and excited about managing land for nature. Years later, Dick wrote a book with Laughton Johnstone (another warden) called *Beinn Eighe, The Land above the Wood*, to celebrate the first 50 years of this National Nature Reserve. The story is fascinating.

In the early years there was very little experience of managing land for nature, especially woodland (early RSPB reserves were mostly wetlands). There were few scientific papers on the subject and no weighty conservation handbooks to guide reserve managers. Instead, as the book describes, there were passionate debates and heated clashes of ideas between ecologists, foresters, traditional estate owners, politicians and, of course, those holding the

purse strings. Being warden of the iconic Beinn Eighe, Britain's first National Nature Reserve (NNR), Dick met and debated the ecology and management of the Highlands with the foremost ecologists of the time. Back then there was no clear vision of the wildwood of the future. Some thought the shapely granny pines at Beinn Eighe were the epitome of the wild Caledonian pinewood, other argued these were misshapen trees left over after the good timber trees had been removed. Everyone agreed grazing/browsing was damaging and prevented young trees growing inside or outside the wood and so threatened the long term survival of the wood, and they debated long and hard what to do about it.

At the time the question was 'will the wood start to regenerate if grazing/browsing is prevented?' So on Beinn Eighe (and many other reserves) over the years an array of enclosures of different sizes, at different altitudes, on different soil types, were constructed to find out what happens. The early enclosures were mostly small, four are less than one hectare in size, but over time the enclosures gradually increased in size and underwent a name change to 'exclosures' for keeping deer out. After thirty years there was ample proof that trees regenerate if deer and sheep are excluded by fences, so in 1988 the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) erected a ring fence seven kilometres long, enclosing 1,100 hectares at Beinn Eighe. Dick argued against this fence, he wanted to reduce deer

numbers by 60 per cent instead of erecting another fence, but he was over-ruled.

There were equally fractious debates about the best way to prepare the ground for trees. Foresters wanted to plough and plant, *laissez-faire* ecologists preferred not to disturb the soil and wait for trees to regenerate naturally, and one member of NCC Committee wanted to make holes with the explosive 'camoufflets' used by sappers. Some wanted to fertilise the trees, others thought this unnecessary. Some were careful to spot plant tree species suited to the ground conditions, other had a more cavalier approach. Some wanted to plant only trees raised from local seed in the tree nursery, while others were happy to plant trees sourced from other places. The results of these debates and experiments in land management can still be seen on the Reserve today, if you know where to look. The ploughing scars are still visible, but all the Scots pine of the wrong provenance (Glen Affric) that were planted have now been removed and replanted with trees of the appropriate provenance (Wester Ross). Many lessons about how to manage land for nature were learned on Beinn Eighe NNR; lots of scientific papers have been published and guidance has been included in the management handbooks used by today's woodland managers.

The primary focus at Beinn Eighe was getting trees to grow by excluding deer. But Dick appreciated that red deer roamed across neighbouring

Above: Regenerating birch woodland at Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve. September 2015; Dick Balharry in birch woodland regeneration at Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve, July 1997. Photos: Lorne Gill/SNH.



estates, so he set up the Gairloch Conservation Unit (the first deer management group in the country) so that estates with quite different management objectives could meet to discuss deer issues. The Forestry Commission wanted no deer at all in their plantations, NCC tolerated a few deer on the reserve but not many, one estate wanted lots of stags with large antlers and lots of hinds to produce the stags, and another estate wanted as much venison as possible. Co-operative management of wild roaming animals is a challenge when neighbouring estates have such different objectives! Dick always encouraged managers to think about deer as well as trees, and he argued passionately that reducing deer numbers would be good for trees and good for deer too.

Creag Meagaidh: trees and deer

By the 1980s, NC had been replaced by the NCC and Dick was now Chief Warden for North East Scotland region. This was a turbulent decade for NCC, and staff spent much of their time re-notifying Sites of Special Scientific Interest and negotiating management agreements, some involving controversial compensation payments. In 1985, amidst much controversy, NCC bought Creag Meagaidh (3,940 hectares for £431,000 or £109 per hectare) to prevent Fountain Forestry from planting the lower slopes with Sitka

spruce using a Government grant.

Drawing on the lessons he had learned on other reserves, Dick was able to persuade NCC to cull deer hard on Creag Meagaidh to reduce browsing/grazing pressure to a low level, to enable the wood to regenerate naturally with as little fencing as possible. In 1985 there were about 1,000 red deer on

the reserve, mainly hinds, so to give the regenerating trees a head start, NCC erected a fence around 350 hectares, which Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) was able to take down ten years later as it was no longer needed – young trees were growing away nicely.

The main debate at Creag Meagaidh was how to reduce the number of deer. For a while, deer were baited into a pen, caught alive and sold to deer farms, but when the market for live deer collapsed, stalkers reverted to conventional stalking. They had to find the best way to remove deer carcasses from the hill while causing minimal damage to the fragile habitats, so the stalkers experimented with ponies, helicopters, argocats and the most strenuous way – dragging to a suitable pick up point. Stalkers also had to learn to shoot deer when visitors to the reserve disturbed their quarry, and when the law changed they obtained licences to shoot at night or out of season. Their hard work has paid off, there are very few red deer on the NNR now.

Whilst NCC was convinced about keeping deer numbers very low to allow the woodland to regenerate, others remained overtly hostile, particularly the neighbouring sporting estates. Their big concern was the 'vacuum effect', where deer move off their land onto the reserve to fill 'the vacuum' NCC created by shooting deer. Dick debated with these protesters, drawing upon his many years of discussing how to manage land for nature, aided by the

deer data collected on the reserve, but despite his untiring efforts he did not convince them all.

After ten years, in 1995, Dick worked with Paul Ramsay to publish *The Revival of the Land – Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve*. The summary says "SNH wished to explore an alternative model, a system that could rebuild natural capital and, in the long run, use it sustainably; a different approach from that which had gone before, but one which is essential if the Highlands are to arrest their decline and fulfil their ecological potential". Dick wanted the book to persuade other land managers to consider using the approach he had set at Creag Meagaidh – nurturing woodland without fences. You can see the results for yourself if you drive from Newtonmore to Spean Bridge.

A legacy of inspiration

Today there are many nature reserves around Scotland managed by different organisations, which is a big change from the 1960s when Dick started work. There are also many more reserve managers, men and women. There is a lot of experience about how to manage land for nature, but still much more to learn. Nature reserves are now an accepted type of land management which they were not in the 1950s. But much, much more needs to be done; we need a lot less wet desert and a lot more land managed for nature; we need to join up islands of wildland so that species can move between them.

Dick wanted a healthier wild Highlands where our native wildlife - eagles, dotterel, wild cats and pine marten - could all thrive alongside people. He pursued his dream and made it reality. He was an inspiration to many, and wherever he is now, I am sure he is cheering us on to do more, to rewild the Highlands and bring back the lynx. He laid the foundations; now what are you going to do to build on these foundations and rewild more of Scotland?

Jill Matthews worked alongside Dick when he was based in Aberdeen. Jill worked for NCC/SNH until 2011, and led the Review of National Nature Reserves and the programme to Raise Standards on NNRs.

Above: Regenerating birch woodland at Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve in 1997. Photos: Lorne Gill/SNH.