

Restoration Cases Flagship Collection

Case #: Rewilding the Scottish Highlands



Planted Scots Pines and blooming heather inside a fence in stark contrast to the surrounding landscape. Photo credit: Alan Watson Featherstone

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In brief

Overview

The Scottish Highlands have been largely devoid of trees for centuries. Forest clearing was followed by the eradication of large predators (wolves and lynx) and a dramatic increase in grazers, mainly deer and sheep. To date, high grazing pressure has prevented forests from growing back, and large hunting estates have prevented actions to control deer. In this challenging context, the NGO Trees for Life (TFL) rewilded thousands of hectares to native Scottish forest. They showed that areas near remnant forests can regenerate naturally if grazing pressure is reduced and developed methods to propagate and plant native tree species. They also reintroduced red squirrels to many forest fragments and advocate the reinstatement of other keystone animals, especially large predators. Their work has shown that native trees and plants can regenerate naturally in some places, but only when grazers are controlled. Their future work focuses on collaborating with landholders and hunters to rewild the Highlands at larger scales.

Exemplary practices

TFL founder Alan Watson Featherstone began collaborating with the national government at a very small scale to create enclosures and plant trees for several years, as part of the Findhorn Foundation, before setting up TFL as an independent charity in 1993. This early work, funded by individual donations, provided a powerful demonstration of what can happen when grazing is reduced, and helped build momentum. Their work has always relied on a combination of strong, dedicated leadership and organized volunteer programs, which served to educate and engage people from across the UK to implement rewilding programs. Their rewilding techniques mimic nature whenever possible; species are planted where they would naturally be found, and trees are planted in irregular stands. Their nursery specializes in hard to find/grow native species, many of which are unavailable commercially, and produces for their operations and others.

Key lessons learned

- ◇ *Persistent, visionary leadership can go a long way towards making rewilding a reality.*
- ◇ *Reducing grazing pressure is critical for restoring the Scottish Highlands.*
- ◇ *Deer populations can be reduced locally, allowing forests to recover.*
- ◇ *Rewilding requires a mixed-methods, location-specific approach.*
- ◇ *Animal reintroductions are difficult but essential for long term ecosystem function.*
- ◇ *Rewilding needs people: Incorporate local needs and culture into rewilding design.*