

Speech by Douglas Wilson, Chair, to AGM 7.11. 2022

We're celebrating ten years of our community woodland and ten years may be a long time for the likes of us, but it's not long for a wood.

It's easy to see the last decade through the physical changes in Evanton Wood: the cabin, the shelter, the composting toilets, the playpark, the ponds, the track to the pipe bridge or the Mag's Wood bypass.

But those changes were made for the purpose of inviting people into the wood, of making them welcome here. And people have responded to that invitation. Over the years many playgroup, nursery and primary school children from Evanton have visited and enjoyed this wonderful place. Beyond the village, school groups regularly visit from Dingwall Academy and we have had visits also from Tain, Invergordon, Alness, Muir of Ord and as far as Ullapool. In summer, Highlife runs bushcraft and shelter building classes. At all times children head off into the wood for adventures. Ideally, all children should have a Community Wood to enjoy within walking distance, and Evanton Wood is happy to provide proof of that particular concept.

For sport and fitness, the woods have traditionally provided walking, running and cycling opportunities, and the community wood has extended that to orienteering competitions, cross country races and mountain bike events.

Arts events have included storytelling, a wide variety of music, dance, craftwork and woodworking including green woodworking.

Social events have included our regular Friday futures group and seasonal Easter, Christmas and Halloween events, weddings, birthday parties, celebrations and shenanigans.

The excellence of the wood has been recognised over the years. While part of Novar Estate, it won the best small woodland award at Scotland's Finest Woodlands. As a community wood, it has won education and health awards, enjoys class visits from the Scottish School of Forestry at UHI and has had an official, and memorable, visit by the Princess Royal.

All these activities were enriched by the woodland setting, but they also served to connect people with the wood.

That connection works both ways. Looking eye to eye with a roe deer or squirrel, seeing the flash of colour from a dragonfly or a Jay, or watching a newt hanging bloated in the pond. These are gifts the wood repays us with for a little patience and quiet.

Some of you have gardens that open onto the woods, many more will have favourite paths or places. On the main tracks you can meet friends, the secondary paths are quieter and off-track you have the wood to yourself. The seasons bring gifts too, fresh green light through the spring leaves, cool mossy areas in summer, the glory of beech in

autumn, and winter bringing icicles in the gorge, ice hair emerging from fallen wood, branches bowed with snow.

We receive so much from our visits and we repay that in many ways. The informal efforts of walkers clearing a track of a fallen branch, picking up litter, or the hardy souls who remove broken glass or dog waste bags. Through these, the wood is refreshed, and we can enjoy it without distractions, without things that ought not to be there.

Over the years, our formal volunteers have gifted thousands of hours of hand and mind: as trustees on the committee, in organising groups, as hosts for events, completing the dreaded but needful admin and watering the trees with sweat as woodland volunteers. When I was writing this, I tried naming people who have volunteered or contributed to the wood, but the list was so long, the Autumn leaves would have fallen before I finished. You know who you are. Your reward for your efforts is all around you when you walk in the woods.

But you can't have a community wood without community, and it's your support and engagement that sustains everything that is done here. The volunteer effort springs from this community and that will continue, so that the wood reflects the needs of Evanton. If it does *that* well, then it will also be valued far beyond the village.

The wood isn't a plantation, grown to be clear-felled, it isn't a wildlife reserve, it isn't a park or garden. It is a wood. Beyond the stream, the Allt Cul na Greine, we have only signage to the Gorge, carved benches are replaced by cut logs and there are no picnic tables. The wood remains itself.

Ten years isn't long for a wood and we inherited the efforts of generations of Novar foresters. The tall, straight trees that are characteristic of the wood, and which are shown on our village entrance sign, are not our work, although we *are* shaping trees to replace them. Continuity, but with a little variety. A place that children playing here now can return to as adults and still recognise, enjoy and share with a new generation. Together, that's what we're supporting when we meet, whether that's here at an AGM, or out in the woods.

Thank you.