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**Ben Shieldaig update**

30th July 2020

**The last few months have been an incredibly challenging time for everyone however the level of activity and support for each other within the Shieldaig community has been truly inspiring and a reminder of how fortunate we are to be working with you. It’s good to now be able to get back out on site and start seeing the place and meeting people again. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed back some of our proposed timescales for what we’d like to achieve on Ben Shieldaig however, in some ways, this gives us more time to make sure our plans are robust and can bring as much benefit to the local environment, its wildlife, and the people who live here. After all, one year is little in the life of a granny pine! Thanks to everyone for their patience and continued support.**

**Woodland Management and Creation**

* Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we stopped all activity on site in March. This meant that Trees for Life Woodland Services (TfL), our appointed agent, halted all work on our ecological baseline surveys which will then be used to inform our management plans. As many of these, including Protected Species, Breeding Bird and Vantage Point surveys, have to be undertaken in spring time this means we will only be able to complete our survey work by Summer 2021. Consequently, there will be a delay in producing and consulting on our management plan for the estate, along with the establishment of any new woodland.
* From the results of some of the surveys which have been completed, the main areas for planting will likely be the corrie in the north east of the site and the western and south western slopes of Ben Shieldaig along Glen Shieldaig. In this way the designated woodland on the estate could be extended southwards though it is important to note that the ground is in quite a challenging condition so will take some time for substantial numbers of pine to establish.
* Despite this delay, TfL have secured funding to to undertake a scoping study to explore the idea of working with our neighbours to undertake a collaborative woodland creation scheme, including the above areas of Ben Shieldaig, within a large strategic fence. This should report back by the end of the year.

**Deer Management**

* We understand that there has been increased deer activity within the village in recent months, perhaps due to the area being quieter with less visitors. Thanks to everyone who is keeping us updated. We aim to put a stalker in place intermittently during the stag season primarily to try and discourage the deer from coming into the village as frequently and disturbing people’s gardens. The community will be welcome to any suitable carcasses available.
* We had been waiting to confirm our woodland creation areas and fence lines before producing a Deer Management Plan however as these won’t be confirmed until next year, we will produce an interim plan for the next year which will cover our proposed activities. These will include habitat monitoring, a potential drone survey using thermal imagery and a limited cull of stags and hinds, during each of their seasons, and according to the South West Ross Deer Management Group recommendations.

**Access & Estate Management**

* Again, due to delays to our Management Plan for the estate being ready, we’ll have to wait to present and consult on any plans for access on the estate. We are still looking to put in a new 4x4 management access track from the A896 to Loch Damh, along the boundary of our estate. Some suggestions were made as to whether the existing quad track by the Balgy river might be made available and upgraded however from initial surveying of the area the ground is extremely boggy, and upgrading would negatively impact a lot of the archaeology in the area. Surveys for this track will restart again in 2021.
* Part of this survey work will explore putting in a small car park at the existing layby by Loch Dughail, at the edge of the pinewood. We would like to use this as a way for visitors to access the pinewood and will be looking at options for low-impact paths or way-marked trails to help people experience the site.

**Engagement and Interpretation**

* Despite the project timescales being put back, there will still be a number of other opportunities to engage with us and feedback as our plans for the site develop. We are happy to discuss plans and ideas at any time so please get in touch.
* Unfortunately, many of the events we had planned for this year have had to be put on hold and these will now only likely take place in 2021. We’ll put out more information on these as soon as possible, and look forward to being able to many of you joining us. We may still be able to organise a guided walk to learn more about red squirrels on site however this will depend on being able to hold the event safely and securely, with limited numbers.
* An initial Interpretation Plan for the estate was completed in April 2020. Many thanks to all those who contributed and came along to the workshops. This Plan is a first step outlining some of the opportunities available – we’ll now start to explore these further to see which would be the most effective and achievable. A copy is available on request if anyone would like to see.
* As reported previously, we would like to change the name of the estate to the Gaelic spelling, **Beinn Shieldaig**, which would be more in keeping with local history and heritage. We would appreciate any feedback on this idea!
* Please look for ‘Malcolm Turner’ on if you would like to connect on Facebook. I have joined the Shieldaig Community Association page so should be easy to find.

**Volunteering**

* Since taking on Ben Shieldaig, there has been a fantastic interest in helping out with our work on the estate. We’d love to have as many people as involved as possible – it’s a great way to learn new skills whilst contributing to some of our aims such as new woodland and habitat restoration. We had hoped to propose a number of volunteering opportunities this year however these are only likely to happen next year due to current restrictions. These will likely include monitoring of wildlife (especially red squirrels initially), assessing natural regeneration of woodland and grazing impacts and collecting seeds for some of our planting plans. If anyone would like to discuss ideas further, please get in touch.

**Please contact us for any further information:**

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