

CWA Conference 29th & 30th Sept 2023

It was a great meeting with interesting talks and discussions, an opportunity to speak to a range of different community reps, some I've not met before and others who I haven't seen for a long while.

A common thread is that in order to achieve their aims most groups seem to be working in partnership with other organisations and groups. They almost never work on their own. If we are to achieve things, I think we have to think about doing this more. Another main theme was young people. The future for young people in our area was a main driver for the starting of the Fernaig Community Trust, and I think in the light of the changes that have happened over the last 25 years it would be useful to re-appraise how we should now act for the benefit of the upcoming generations.

The keynote speaker was Ariane Burgess, MSP for the Highlands and Islands. She was enthusiastically pushing the woodland and community empowerment agendas through the Green/SNP agreement. She seemed very positive, and I think we have potentially a good ally there.

We heard from several Glasgow area groups and, as with the conference, the emphasis was on involving young people and also being in an urban context, dealing with vandalism, graffiti etc. Most seem to be doing great work and communities are really benefitting from these groups.

Rural groups are also working a lot with young people – one of the pioneers of this was Abriachan with 25 years of woodland educational and recreational activities for local young people and lots from further afield. There are a number of young adults now working locally thanks to the skills learned. The work they have done has also put £3.75M into the local economy. This is a community about the same size as ours.

A group at Uigshader in Skye bought some forest land some years back and are now building a large shed to house machinery. They are working on a program of tree planting, firewood and sawmilling. I will keep in touch with them.

There was a presentation from a UHI researcher about how to increase development and employment skills, through various programs. There are skills shortages in many rural areas and these can be addressed to help retain young people.

I attended two workshops;

- 1 What to do when it goes wrong. It seems to be quite a common occurrence that communities have problems! Factions often develop and people try to take things in different directions according to their personal interests. Governance is a perennial problem, with boards occasionally being reported to authorities such as OSCR. The Scottish Mediation Service can be helpful. Suggested ways of avoiding getting to this stage were (a) having induction packs for directors when they come onto the board so that they are clear about how it works and responsibilities etc, and (b) having some basic training – this is available from SCVO. Conflict generally comes from lack of information and communication. Other problems include recruiting board members, to ensure a reasonable turnover. It was suggested that to ensure smooth

running it is helpful to have deputies/understudies for all office bearers in case of people being unavailable or indisposed.

2 Rewilding. It is often thought that rewilding is about removing people, but the intention is to increase the productive capacity of the land which actually supports more people. The following were the 9 basic principles laid out by Northwoods (an organisation co-ordinating rewilding projects in Scotland).

- More native woodland
- More space for water
- Wilder rivers
- Joined up habitats
- Restoring native species
- Let nature lead
- Natural grazing
- Connecting with communities
- Rewilding enterprise

James Nairne from 'Scotland the Big Picture' led the discussion on how communities and land users can benefit from rewilding projects and the support there is for nature recovery. There were people present from a wide variety of backgrounds, including foresters and crofters and there was much debate about grazing different types of stock, among other things, and how to use them to improve biodiversity.

It seems unlikely that we would be involved in any major rewilding projects but the principles could be useful to think about while carrying out any land management activity as they are really about working with nature rather than against it, and should result in an all round benefit.

The site visit I attended was to Malls Mire Community Woodland in Toryglen. It's a very small woodland, but they have a lot of educational and fun activities for kids, and it's a great recreational space for everyone. Activities include conservation work outdoor education, children's clubs and family events. They seem to be dealing very effectively with the inevitable problems of this type of place, largely by including everyone they can and working with other organisations. Malls Mire was the first community woodland in Glasgow and was made a Local Nature Reserve in 2015.

The CWA is a great resource with access to help from the staff and members. The website has a large amount of information on it too. The Conference was a good opportunity to talk directly to people who really know their stuff, and a chance to explore ideas, learn about resources and broaden the view. I highly recommend future attendance to this type of event to all FCT board members. I don't think the FCT would be what it is without members having gained knowledge, help and inspiration from this type of event in past years.

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