

THE CHARITABLE DESTRUCTION OF A COMMUNITY ASSET

Background

Walkers and members of the deer management community have been shocked and stunned by the recent discovery of large numbers of deer culled and left to rot on the isolated property of Li & Coire Dhorcail on the north west coast of Knoydart. Some had haunches removed, and others were found beheaded where they fell. The scale is such that the incident is effectively a major wildlife crime in everything but name. It has not been carried out by a rogue landlord or estate, but by an environmental NGO, the John Muir Trust (JMT).

The numbers are not known because the information has not been fully disclosed, but 86 red deer stags have been culled this summer, and JMT admit the majority have not been retrieved. Given the difficulty of accessing the area and removing deer carcasses, it is likely that almost all of these animals will have been left lying where they were shot. A huge amount of manpower will have been required to do this, and such input will have required strategic direction.

Such an incident removes a potential income of about £100,000 from the wider community, a sum they can ill afford to do without. It cannot be justified as providing food for golden eagles or helping woodland regeneration. On the former, a deer carcase left on the hill in winter will feed an eagle for several months. In summer, they will rot away in a few weeks. On the latter, the small area of woodland regeneration that JMT seeks to expand has no strategic national or local significance, and is out of all proportion to the cost being extracted in terms of the numbers of animals which have to be killed. Deer populations in Knoydart are relatively low, and there is no threat to the wider habitat or environment.

The dominant culture across rural Scotland is that if you kill an animal, you should try to make use of it. In disrespecting this convention, JMT have completely misjudged their actions here, and have risked bringing their organization in to disrepute as a consequence.

A threat to the local economy

The JMT did not provide a warning or engage in consultation with those affected, other than a minor non specific statement at a meeting six months before. As a result, livelihoods are threatened in the wider area.

The lack of alternative employment in this remote, highly marginal economic area is a serious concern for many of the locals. Annual rainfall peaking at 4 metres is over three times the Congo. Highly acidic infertile soils, short summer seasons, remote access, much of it only by sea, and a lack of infrastructure all make for an environment that precludes farming, renewable energy, forestry or even tourism income of any substance; hence the economic significance of the deer management industry. Conservation per se does not provide a local economic substitute and is more heavily dependent on public sector subsidy than other options.



Stag carcasses abandoned by JMT

Historically, even by Highlands standards, An Garbh Chrìochan or the Rough Bounds as it is known, has always been a harsh environment to survive in. Notorious local clans such as the MacMillans of Glen Dessary, or the MacDonalds of Barrisdale survived by periodic raiding in other more fertile places such as Ireland or the Strathspey lands of the clan Grant.

The supreme irony of this ongoing situation is that JMT are a tax exempt cash rich urban based organisation with over £2m in cash reserves. They do not have any permanent staff in the Knoydart or Assynt areas and do not invest in any kind of infrastructure. A tax exempt urban 'charitable' organisation in receipt of a substantial annual public subsidy; it surely cannot be appropriate for these resources to be deployed in the destruction of the only self supporting rural economic industry in the area.



Winter stags in Glen Dessary, Knoydart

Comparisons

These latest actions are redolent of the nineteenth century American commercial buffalo hunters killing large numbers of large herbivores just for the tongues, and indirectly intended to remove the native population. This is a shocking waste of a valuable resource as it takes eight to ten years of careful management to produce mature stags, the saleable product of a successful European industry. How can an organisation describing itself as an environmental charity be so indifferent to sustainability or the interests of the local community around them?

How then did this situation arise? Imagine an outcome in Scandinavia, where an urban based conservation charity buys a little land next to Lapland reindeer herders and then sets about destroying the herd resource, in order to facilitate an unspecified level of regeneration of tundra lichen in a very limited area. The social economic consequences would be drastic and it is hard to imagine it being tolerated, either by local or central government, or even by Scandinavian society. And yet this is tolerated in Scotland because of a lack of understanding of the real issues.

Confused by notions and preconceptions of uncharismatic absentee landlords, we have failed to notice the political plaything that landownership in the Highlands has become for some NGO's

Undermining others

And this is the recurring theme; a stubborn refusal to engage and work with local communities despite frequent critical media coverage. Rigidly aloof and almost spurred on by these negative media interactions, it leaves those on the losing side trying to struggle on in order to come up with some form of sustainable rural industry. The task of long-term deer management planning is impossible and future population modelling is virtually pointless, all because a major player will not engage.

It is not the first time a charity has turned its direction of emphasis towards political lobbying. Much of JMT salary expenditure is focused on funding urban based executive posts engaged in lobbying the Scottish Government or compiling objections to rural planning applications. In other words not the creation of quality jobs in the rural areas where they own land. The process is ruthless with an ongoing sustained campaign to discredit the voluntary system of local deer management groups. Working alongside Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), the Deer Management Group (DMG) system seeks to achieve a wide based consensual approach with full public disclosure of information. Recent progress will make DMG's fit for the social aspirations of the 21st century. However, there is an adamant refusal by JMT to recognise this and furthermore, a determination to discredit the process by contriving dysfunctionality through their own non participation. This is supreme hypocrisy. Community public engagement is the key activity expected of land managers today. How strange that a charity should exhibit the very characteristics targeted by current land reform proposals.

A refusal to engage

No one objects to their laudable long term conservation objectives. Indeed, JMT used to be well regarded as a capable, practical organization, and a safe pair of hands who would take on board community opinion. The difference now relates to disagreement on the methods of achieving these goals. JMT simply will not now engage in the collaborative approach required to manage a community economic resource of this nature. There is an absolutely implacable refusal to consult or seek to accommodate the interests of others. This is a real pity because there is a clear willingness by the community to work to the same objectives for the benefit of all.

The JMT stance is one of aggressive resistance, denial, sometimes casual disinformation and an unwillingness to share information. There has been a reluctance to admit how many carcasses have been left on the hill because it is an inconvenient issue to expose to public scrutiny. Vital management data such as average ages or weights, with locations is neither gathered nor shared; all part of routine tasks carried out by responsible land managers in the neighbouring areas. Hence the reason JMT are at loggerheads with the Assynt crofting community as well as in Knoydart. It therefore makes it almost impossible for a joint local community- NGO approach to take place.

The tragedy of all this is the missed opportunity for different land managers to work together to achieve diverse sustainable objectives. It is perfectly possible for the JMT objectives to be achieved without such collateral damage. It might take a bit longer, or involve consideration of viable alternatives but most of all, it will require a level of genuine community engagement that we are not seeing at the moment.

This kind of incident, which we cannot and must not ignore, can only further alienate the John Muir Trust from local Highland communities and their own supporters as well. It needs to be brought to wider attention and described for what it is, namely the gratuitous and politically motivated slaughter of iconic animals for no good reason whatsoever.

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