

Cairngorms Connect – Written evidence (NSD0038)

Cairngorms Connect is a partnership of neighbouring land managers, committed to a bold and ambitious 200-year vision to enhance habitats, species, and ecological processes across a vast area within the Cairngorms National Park. The four land managing partners are Wildland Limited, Forestry and Land Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and RSPB Scotland.

What major scientific uncertainties persist in understanding the effects of nature-based solutions and affect their inclusion in carbon accounting, and how can these uncertainties be addressed?

The climate implications of growing trees on peat soils remain poorly understood. A particular gap is the effect of natural woodland regeneration, and alternative forms of ground preparation for planting, on carbon stores in organic (peaty) soils.

This knowledge gap can be addressed by establishing properly funded long term studies, taking both a longitudinal and “space for time” approach, that are replicated across representative areas. The “space for time” or “chronosequence” elements would allow answers to be inferred rapidly, with the caveats inherent in this approach. Meanwhile, the longitudinal elements will ultimately allow earlier “space for time” results to be refined or revised.

Which bodies should be involved in establishing an agreed evidence base to inform best-practice techniques for restoring peatlands?

The IUCN Peatland Programme would be the natural lead organisation for this task.

Participants should include any organisations working on peatland restoration, who are also gathering rigorous evidence of efficacy, for example with Before-After-Control-Impact study designs. These include NGOs like RSPB, the statutory sector like FLS, restoration partnerships like Cairngorms Connect, and academic institutions with close and long-term links to restoration projects, like the Environmental Research Institute (University of Highlands and Islands) and James Hutton Institute.

Are there good examples of nature-based solutions already being undertaken in the UK or elsewhere, and what can we learn from them?

The Cairngorms Connect partnership provides an exemplary illustration of the way in which grazing reduction around natural forest remnants can deliver rapid and very extensive woodland expansion. The approach used here is “assisted regeneration”: while natural regeneration is the process creating most of the new woodland, this is assisted by localised planting to boost under-represented species or provide seed sources in areas remote from natural woodland. The patchy structure and mixed species composition of newly regenerating woodland differs from typical silvicultural practice but is nevertheless expected to deliver major biodiversity and climate benefits.

Decades of experience and evidence from the Cairngorms Connect area has shown how an extensive partnership of neighbouring land managers with common aims facilitates the delivery of woodland expansion at scale.

Are there examples of projects which have engaged with stakeholders and local communities to implement nature-based solutions successfully, and what can we learn from them?

RSPB Insh Marshes Nature Reserve is a 1,000-hectare floodplain of the River Spey in the Cairngorms. This floodplain has undergone numerous historical modifications, to drain the land for agriculture through straightening and embanking the rivers, and drains created.

The floodplain now requires constant work to maintain important habitats for wildlife, and changes that are occurring to the modified rivers and embankments could lead to impacts on surrounding communities.

A long-term vision is being developed to transform RSPB Insh Marshes into a prime example of a better-connected floodplain and less modified river system. As a nature-based solution, the project will make the reserve more climate resilient whilst helping to reduce flood risks in communities surrounding the reserve and keep ongoing management requirements sustainable.

The Cairngorms Connect partnership committed to engaging with the local community at as early a stage as possible, to shape proposals well before any planning application was made.

Contact was made with existing land users and with the local community councils first to explain the issues on site, to outline some of the potential solutions and to discuss how best to involve the wider community. A dedicated project page was set up on the main Cairngorms Connect website with all the key information and links to more detailed reports for anybody who wanted to see the details. A leaflet summarising the issues and providing details of the website was delivered to everyone living next to the marsh and to key stakeholders with an extended online survey.

A pop-up exhibition in an empty shop provided an opportunity for direct question and answer sessions between managed visitor numbers and staff over a period of several days. Pre-booked 'Covid-safe' guided visits on-site were arranged for small groups, and a zoom webinar presentation with live Q&A session was also widely promoted. There was surprisingly little overlap in feedback being received through these different engagement channels, with each bringing in responses from different parts of the community.

Lessons Learned

The engagement presents a range of early options for discussion with no clear preferred route and asking opinions in a very open manner. That has not been without its challenges for both community and staff.

Most people understood why some options had been ruled out on technical grounds but were generally unused to being engaged in such an open way and

at such an early stage. Some members of the community are more used to 'consultation' on a pre-conceived plan and were unsure why views were being sought at this stage. Some also had very negative experience of 'tokenistic' engagement by other organisations in the past. It will therefore take time to build up trust as part of progressive engagement.

However, the community and the landscape partnership members will all be much better informed as the project progresses. This is the start of a longer-term conversation. The information on the website will stay there and be updated as feedback informs next steps. Some in the community will need to be persuaded that their 'non-expert' views will count, and feedback needs to be clear about this as the project progresses proposals for a formal planning application. But others are very engaged, and we have identified scope for them to remain involved as a 'reference group' as the conversation evolves, building expertise and link points within the community.

Had the project team gone straight to planning, they may not have got the same response, and may not have been able to react quickly enough. The team now have a conduit to go back and explain changes – a route for ongoing conversation and an understanding of the possibility for change as the project develops.

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