



Community puts new heart in Abriachan forest

Thousands of walkers now enjoy trails through a forest that until recently offered little access and few reasons to visit.

In the forest, foreign species of pine and spruce are slowly giving way to Scots pine and native broadleaf trees. Sightings are up of black grouse, snipe, red kites and ospreys. The forest provides jobs. It has featured on TV and radio and is the subject of a book. It has won a string of awards.

And it has all grown out of a community's determination to safeguard access to common grazings and peat banks.

The story of Abriachan forest, along the Great Glen between Inverness and Drumnadrochit, is the story of what voluntary effort and self-motivation can achieve when people work together and are given the right support.

'The drive behind it is local people wanting to make their part of the country better - it's hugely inspiring.'

Munro Gauld, Community Land Unit, Highlands and Islands Enterprise

'We're not hesitant to ask for things now. We have the confidence to put ourselves forward.'

Suzann Barr, Abriachan Forest Trust

It was in 1992 that community councillors learned that tracts of the nearby forest were likely to be sold, sparking fears for local access rights.

Six years later, 540 acres of Abriachan forest became the largest community-owned forest in Scotland, run by a trust set up by local people.

As landowners, locals have set about with relish transforming bland forest acres into a recreational area, a visitor attraction, a source of employment, a wildlife research area, a children's play area, a peat path to fitness (with peat-filled creel for added exercise), an improved natural habitat and a source of education and inspiration for others.

The forest now has nearly 10 miles of roads, footpaths and tracks, three wildlife ponds, rain shelters, a tree house meeting place for young people, picnic tables and two new car parks.

Counters installed by the Abriachan Forest Trust had recorded 32,000 walkers in the two years to October 2004: roughly equal to half the population of Inverness dropping by.

The forest provides work for local contractors, including four full-time and three part-time jobs for local people. The Trust and its educational offshoot, called Outreach, work with schools, students and the community at large. In just two years their dizzying array of workshops, presentations and walks has attracted nearly 5,000 participants. And all this comprises just the first six years' worth of plans that stretch decades ahead. At the heart of the community's achievements, says Munro Gauld of HIE's Community Land Unit, is simply people wanting the best for where they live.

"It's about wanting to be a live community," he says. "It's local people wanting to make their part of the country better."

Continued overleaf

Community impact checklist

- ✓ Recreation and sport facilities created for locals and visitors
- ✓ Local skills improved and confidence boosted
- ✓ All ages able to take part in improvement schemes
- ✓ Tourism potential given a major boost
- ✓ Improvements will benefit generations to come



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And the more the community achieves, the more they know they can achieve. Confidence boosts ambition and sharpens focus.

"They press many of the right buttons," says Marie Mackintosh, formerly of Inverness and Nairn Enterprise. "They're a thriving community business offering employment, they involve a wide-cross-section of the community, they contribute to tourism and they're enhancing the environment."

Awards reward success

Since taking ownership of the forest, Abriachan Forest Trust has won several awards. These include:

- Royal Scottish Forestry Society Awards: Scotland's best woodlands: highly commended (2000) commended (2004)
- Inverness & Nairn Tourism Award: best community project

- Millennium Fellowship Group Award
- Millennium Fellowship Natural Pioneer Award
- National Soroptomist Society award for youth environmental project
- Youth Scotland/BP environmental 'Gruff kids' finalist and 'Grizzly challenge' award winner

Project funding summary

Major sources of funding have included:

- EU Leader II and Objective 1: £50,000
- Forestry Commission: £25,650
- HIE/Community Land Unit: £59,000
- Highland Council landfill tax: £47,000
- Scottish Office Rural Challenge: £83,000
- Scottish Land Fund: £94,000
- SNH: £63,000
- Woodland Grant Scheme: £174,000

Making the most of what you give - and get

In the early days of the forest buy-out the Abriachan community relied on the expertise of bodies such as Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise for identifying and approaching potential backers.

For the enterprise network, it's vital to inject the right amount of funds - or guidance, or professional advice - at precisely the right time, so the assistance becomes a catalyst for even more development.

The community's success in developing Abriachan forest has inspired similar groups throughout Scotland in their approach to projects involving local land.

Abriachan Forest Trust members have travelled as far as London to share their experience with other communities.

Their backers have ranged from small local groups to huge EU projects, from public organisations such as HIE, Highland Council and SNH to private companies such as BP, to lottery cash. For the Trust, one of the secrets of success is to make sure it remains active and visible.

"We know we need to tweak their tail every now and then," says Suzann Barr of the Abriachan Trust. "If you drop below the funding horizon you get lost."

Munro Gauld of HIE puts this another way: "They're the experts now. They're very skilful at putting packages together - and it's very refreshing to see it." And for the backers, the trust's achievements speak for themselves. A major study towards the end of 2004 found that funders all felt the project had provided "good value for the money invested, perceived to be higher than for other comparable community projects".

The trust generates income from forestry and other sources, which cover wages and essential costs such as insurance and accountancy fees. The trust is also developing plans for core income opportunities to supplement timber sales.

