

Growing desire to bring back the wildness and wonder of forests

It's that time of year again, when swathes of our countryside turn into a blaze of fiery colours from vivid gold through to russet red and deep crimson. This annual spectacle reminds us not just of the importance of trees in our landscapes, but also of the onward march of time, marked by the cycle of seasons.

Woods and trees feature prominently in legend and folklore. We know of ancient woodlands and veteran trees that stand as memorials to times long gone. The bond between people and forests is deep rooted. Woods symbolise wildness and wonder, darkness and mystery.

Trees were of such cultural importance that generations of Scots and Gaels named places and landmarks after them. Many familiar local place names are connected with trees: Bourtreehill (hill of the elder); Aikenhead (area with oaks); Leiterfearn (alder slope); Beith (birch). Each letter of the traditional Gaelic alphabet was named after a tree or a shrub.

Yet Scotland is one of the most sparsely-wooded countries in Europe, with our woodland and forest cover consisting mainly of young non-native trees grown quickly for timber. Despite heroic efforts by many individuals and organisations, we could still lose the heart of our native forests and much of the wild-life that depends on the tree cover.

There is some debate about how



Andrew Bachell of the John Muir Trust reports on efforts to restore Scotland's ancient woodlands

much of Scotland was covered in trees in the distant past. Before agriculture and peatland began to spread across our uplands as the climate became wetter and cooler, we know there were huge pine and broadleaved forests across the Highland and Lowlands. These would not have formed a single Great Wood of Caledon, but would have been part of a complex of habitats including fens, bogs, grasslands, dunes and screes. Nonetheless, trees would have dominated.

The processes which diminished the woodlands of the past were many and complex. They certainly included felling for firewood, construction and shipbuilding, and the clearing of forests to create space for farming.

There are historic records of these changes – and more ancient ecological records embedded in soils, sediments and peat. The keeping of grazing animals has since prevented natural regeneration and our woodland has become characterised by isolated blocks, often on poorer soils in areas less suitable for cultivation.

These beautiful but depleted

remnants are all we have left of one of the greatest natural resources the land can provide. The heart has been lost from our woods and with that we have lost an important reminder of our ultimate dependence on what nature provides.

There are schemes to restore our wild woods. This is not about turning the clock back but about creating new resources. One such scheme is the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership, centred on the famous landmark of Schiehallion in Perthshire.

The east side of the mountain is owned and managed by the John Muir Trust, which together with neighbouring owners, the Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust, Dalchonsie & Kynachan Estate, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and Forest Enterprise, is working to restore ancient woodlands, create new woodland and make sure that trees are re-established.

The project is also supported by Woodland Trust Scotland, which contributes funding, saplings and expertise. The project was recently cited in the Scottish Government's



↑ Forest Enterprise Scotland, Highland Perthshire Communities Partnership,

Scottish Wildlife Trust, Kynachan Estate and Woodland Trust Scotland signed the Heart of Scotland Partnership agreement

Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement as an example of responsible and sustainable stewardship, with economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits.

There will be timber production and rural skills training for young people, and space for nature to thrive

and people to enjoy the experience of wild woodland once again.

Funds come from several benefactors and public sources. Key is a holistic approach that includes people on the ground and limiting the impact of sheep and deer. There is no timescale for this work because it will never be

finished. There is no such thing as a final forest: nature is infinitely adaptable and constantly evolving. Once established it will be nature that sets the pace and outcome.

That might seem slow and faintly romantic, but none of us will live to see the youngest trees today reach

beyond early adulthood. Some may live for centuries and who can tell what new myths and pleasures may arise around the Heart of Scotland Forest, or what new names may be acquired in that future landscape. Andrew Bachell, chief executive, John Muir Trust.

