



PHOTOGRAPH: DENIS MOLLISON

In the beginning...

Denis Mollison, one of the original ‘gang of four’ who founded the John Muir Trust 30 years ago, recounts how the seeds were sown for an organisation that now has a scale and scope that is unrecognisable from its early days

THE THREATS TO wild land were not so different in the 1970s, with blanket forestry playing the role that wind farms take today. Perhaps the most important difference in debate was over recreational developments. The bodies that should have been most prominent in protecting wild land, particularly the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and what was then the Countryside Commission for Scotland, were widely viewed as playing on the wrong side, having developed intrusive visitor centres, and new bridges and paths through wild heartlands. Many eloquent voices protested, among them Rennie McOwan, Hamish Brown and Jim Crumley; far fewer thought the positive initiative of a new wild land trust viable.

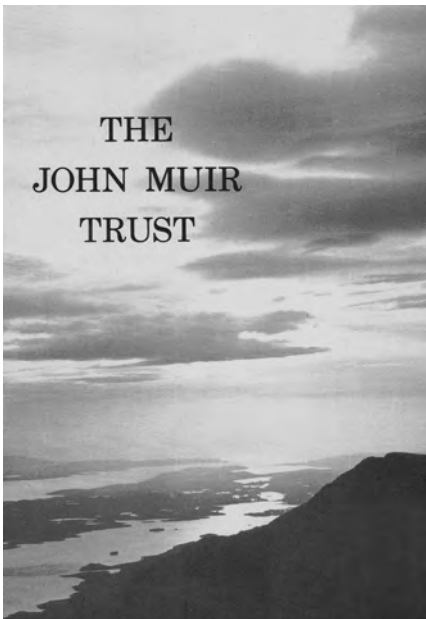
A series of chances brought together four who did. We found that we argued over many things, but not about our shared ideal: to conserve wild land for nature and people. That we agreed even on details, whether to do with wildlife or paths or local people, is not I think coincidental: it is because it is a coherent, rounded ideal – take away one part and it all looks wrong.

Chris Brasher, steeplechase Olympic gold medallist and journalist, wrote in his *Observer* column in 1977: “There are some, no doubt, who will say that land should be used more profitably – that it could be improved or made better for sheep or trees or tourists. And so it could. But please leave us some part of Britain that is still a wilderness, a land where you can walk for four days and see no man.”



PHOTOGRAPH: DEAN MOLLISON

THE THREATS TO WILD LAND WERE NOT SO DIFFERENT... WITH BLANKET FORESTRY PLAYING THE ROLE THAT WIND FARMS TAKE TODAY



Nick Luard, co-founder of Private Eye, author and socialite, wrote *The Last Wilderness* about his search in the Kalahari for why the wild matters, concluding: "... there is in reality no wild at all. The wilderness as we conceived of it did not exist. There was only life, and life was indivisible. We were [destroying] not merely the records of the past but the survival manuals of the future – our future."

About the same time that his book was published, Nick renewed an old friendship with Chris, helping him organise the first London Marathon. In that same year, 1981, journalist Nigel Hawkins and myself, a theoretical ecologist, came to the end of a long attempt to persuade NTS of the value of maintaining wild land – with, as I put it at the time, "minimal development and publicity, and with access open but not particularly facilitated".

Following the failure of this attempt, Nigel set out our joint views in a draft constitution for 'Wild Land in Trust', with the objectives of: encouraging the conservation of wild land as a national heritage resource; and acquiring tracts of wild land in Scotland and managing them as a national heritage resource by maintaining their 'wilderness' quality in perpetuity.

Having discussed the need for a new trust with Chris over the previous five years, I sent Nigel's draft to Chris, who, ironically, had just been asked to give the NTS Golden Jubilee lectures and had chosen the title 'Happiness is a Wilderness'. At this point, the whole 20,000 hectare peninsula of Knoydart was put on the market, and at a discussion over this at NTS (they were not interested), Chris agreed with my suggestion that any new trust should be named after John Muir.

Early days (clockwise from opposite): Ladhair Bheinn from across Loch Hourn, August 1988; Jim Ross, Keith Miller and Terry Isles lever a fallen boulder off the path while working at Coire Dhorrcail (also August 1988); the cover of the Trust's first Membership Leaflet [June 1987]

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BUILDING MEMBERSHIP



For an organisation that saw its public launch five years after its actual formation, it's perhaps no surprise that membership took a little time to gain momentum. By 1987, the Trust had around 70 members, recruited by word of mouth and some low-key publicity. But that all changed the following year when Chris Brasher's impassioned article in the *Observer* and the Trust's appeal for its first property, Li and Coire Dhorraicail in Knoydart, saw membership surge to 700. Having the Prince of Wales sign up as patron of the Trust – a position he still holds today – didn't hurt either.

"The *Observer* article in particular was a real breakthrough and probably one of the biggest single spikes in membership we've seen," recalls Keith Anderson, who took over membership duties in autumn 1987. "The article was about the only visibility the Trust had at that point. It included a freepost address which did the trick – it probably generated around 400 new members."

The Trust hasn't really looked back since. By October 1991, when Keith handed over the bulk of membership duties to his wife, Jane, numbers had risen to 1,500. The succession of land purchases during the following decade generated further significant growth.

"Most membership spikes came via the publicity generated around property acquisitions," explains Keith. Interestingly, some proved particularly popular, with Sandwood (in 1993), Strathaird (1994/5) and Ben Nevis (2000), all generating significant interest (not to mention national coverage in the case of the latter).

But who was signing up? Typically in those early days, the Trust attracted predominantly middle-aged, well-educated professionals, many of whom had a love of the Scottish mountains and a deep knowledge of specific areas. "That said, I do remember one enquiry from a member about how they might get a caravan to Knoydart," recalls Keith. With a long run-up, one might have been tempted to answer.

So, what has the Trust learnt about being a membership organisation? "I think mainly that membership does not happen by itself and takes a lot of work," believes Keith. "Today, we have a membership department of three people managing more than 10,000 members, although there is still a need to continue investing in membership."

Richard Rowe



Gathering momentum (clockwise from top left): the appeal for Ben Nevis; Sierra Club president Larry Downing speaks outside John Muir's Birthplace at the Trust's launch (with children in ca. 1840 costume); scattered remnant woodland in lower Coire Dhorraicail (1988); Ben Tindall and Nigel Hawkins on Ladhar Bheinn, New Year 1985, during a prospecting trip when it was learnt that part of Knoydart might be for sale; the 10th anniversary appeal for Sandwood



Nigel and I spent the following year trying to persuade friends in Scotland to found a wild land trust, but they instead founded the campaigning Scottish Wild Land Group (a body which remains today). Meanwhile, Chris and Nick spent the year in ever more desperate plans to save Knoydart, ending with a time-share scheme which they rashly sent for discussion to NTS, just around the time that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) expressed interest in buying the peninsula. [The reason given was that in the wake of the Falklands War, our army needed a rugged training ground – a paradoxical argument as the army had performed very well on the Falklands' rough terrain.] It was at one of these NTS meetings, on 20 December 1982, that all four founders were together for the first time.

NTS, with support from a consortium of established bodies, now hijacked what had become a gang of four's initiative only to eventually have the rug pulled out from under them by their own unenthusiastic council.

Meanwhile, Chris and Nigel had visited Knoydart to make common cause with the inhabitants, and Nick had dined with Michael Heseltine the evening before he took over as Minister of Defence: the next day the MoD withdrew their offer.

In continuing unsuccessful negotiations with NTS, the idea of a Knoydart Foundation was born, and gained considerable publicity, though it was not to come to fruition for another 16 years. Rather less publicity was given to the signing the same day – 19 January 1983 – of the Memorandum and Articles of the John Muir Trust.



PHOTOGRAPH: DENIS MOLLISON

After the NTS consortium's collapse that March, it took more than a year for the four founders to get their breath back and choose Trustees, who first met on 12 April 1984. Chris and Nick were among the Trustees, Nigel became secretary, and myself treasurer. Two months later, membership was started, with long-standing ally Bob Aitken as membership secretary (membership reached 55 in its first year, see sidebar, Building membership, opposite). It took a further two years to buy a first property – ironically a small piece of the Knoydart Estate whose fragmentation we had tried to prevent.

There followed a year of quiet fundraising, culminating in our public launch outside John Muir's birthplace in Dunbar on 21 April 1988 – Muir's 150th birthday. The launch was addressed by our first Chairman, Sir Kenneth Alexander, and Larry Downing, President of the Sierra Club founded by Muir, who deserted his half-million members to celebrate with us – and brought with him a cheque for \$25,000.

Two weeks earlier, our first paid employee, Terry Isles, had started work. Two weeks later, an article by Chris in the *Observer* highlighting the Trust's purchase in Knoydart gave impetus to our launch, helping our membership soar from 70 to 700 over the year. And in June 1988, we held our first work party on Li and Coire Dhorrcail in Knoydart. Our real work began at last. □

ENTER THE AWARD

One of the Trust's most far-reaching contributions to date is an educational initiative that was never part of the original plan. Launched in 1997, but conceived several years before, the John Muir Award has helped spread the Trust's conservation message to a much wider audience – with a particular focus on encouraging young people to engage with the outdoors.

The brainchild of Ben Tindall – whose father did much to repatriate the Muir name to Scotland in the 1970s – the development of the Award was first mooted in 1993. Trust member number four, the first editor of the Journal (then a newsletter), and a strong advocate of environmental education since the Trust's early days, Ben was keen to develop an award scheme aimed at school-age children. Evolved together with teacher and Muir scholar, Graham White, the idea was to launch the scheme in Lothian and then expand it to the Highlands, closer to where Trust properties were located.

"At the time, I was using the Duke of Edinburgh Award as a model for a non-competitive award that we could piggy back throughout the country and across various categories based on Muir's own varied life and career," he explains.

It's fair to say that not all Trustees at the time were entirely convinced, but when Ben helped secure funding of £8,000 from Scottish Natural Heritage, the Trust was able to bring Dave Picken on board for three months to work on getting the Award off the ground. What began in Lothian expanded east to – appropriately enough – Dunbar and grew from there. The rest, as they say, is history. In March 2010, celebrations were held for the 100,000th John Muir Award.

"I remember we were delighted by its rate of growth," recalls Ben, who points to a basic design and structure that remains unchanged today. "It was seen as a good alternative to other recognised schemes and was more in tune with the enthusiasm and interests of kids and teachers."

For more on the inclusion work of the Award, turn to page 28.

Richard Rowe

Further info

Chris Brasher's *Observer* article which helped generate so much interest in the Trust's early work is available to view at <http://bit.ly/YMnlyG>

A landscape reborn

For more on how the Knoydart landscape has changed since the Trust's acquisition in 1986, turn to page 22.