

MEMBERS' NEWS

JANUARY 2024



JOHN
MUIR
TRUST

EST. 1983



Chair's welcome

There's seldom a quiet time at the John Muir Trust and, as we marked our 40th anniversary last year, the latter half of 2023 was especially busy. In August, we celebrated the occasion with a gathering at our Pitlochry Wild Space visitor centre, with many current and former Trustees in attendance, together with staff and invited guests including our local MSP, John Swinney.

I was struck by the passion and commitment to the Trust's work that was so evident from everyone I spoke with on the day. We also had our AGM in early November and, even though it was held online, there was an impressive level of engagement from Members with lots of interesting and challenging questions.

Our advocacy work has been prominent since the last issue of *Members' News*, with our *Clear on Deer* film screening at venues throughout the UK and also now available to watch online. Packed audiences asked a range of pertinent and penetrating questions about every aspect of the deer management debate, turning each event into a real learning experience for us too.

Another notable development came with the Trust's success in persuading the Scottish Government to explore options for local



authorities to introduce a carbon emissions land tax – something that will be a major focus for us in 2024. You'll find more on these stories and developments inside.

Work on our properties also continued apace with path repairs, litter picking and tree planting at many sites. We've also seen some

important appointments and new staff posts created. For example, our new South Regional Delivery Manager, Gareth Morgan, will lead in developing innovative ideas for urban conservation projects at potential partner sites across England.

Finally, I must mention our fundraising campaigns. These are vital to the Trust's future and it is only through your generosity that we can continue our work to conserve, protect and restore the UK's wild places for the benefit of all.

I would like to wish all Members a very Happy New Year along with heartfelt thanks for your continued support.

Jane Smallman


Call for Trustees

Five Trustee places become vacant on our Board in 2024. We're looking for new Trustees who share our values and will bring fresh ideas to keep us relevant and influential as we work towards our new strategic plan which will take us through to 2026.

We'd like Members to nominate and vote for candidates from diverse backgrounds. Any eligible Member is welcome to stand. The nomination process will close at noon on Friday 1 March 2024.

Successful candidates will be announced at the AGM in September. We look forward to seeing you there or at one of our Members' Gatherings.

For more details about the Trustee call visit johnmuirtrust.org/trusteecall and for the AGM and Members' Gatherings visit johnmuirtrust.org/agm-events



A section of the hill track between Fortingall and Uamh Tom A Mhor-fhir

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Trust investigates construction along an old hill track near Schiehallion

In May last year, we were contacted by a member of the public about construction work along an old hill track from Fortingall over into Gleann Mor, near Schiehallion. On discovering that the works had commenced without a planning application, we contacted Perth and Kinross Council.

The council opened an investigation into the track, plus further development associated with the purchase of Taymouth Castle. Around the same time, we asked Members to get in touch with any photographs or details of the track that we could forward to the council. Thank

you to everyone who got in touch to share photos or information.

Four months later, the council's Closing Report on the enforcement case concluded that the works were being carried out on an existing track. As it amounted to maintenance and qualified as permitted development, the council closed the case without taking any enforcement action.

Although not the result we had hoped for, the experience demonstrated the importance of reporting such changes in open country to local authorities.

Community concern over wind farms on Skye

During 2023 the voices of people and communities on Skye questioning the scale and number of planned onshore wind farm proposals on the island grew stronger and more coordinated. The Trust shares these concerns and was invited to speak at two events on Skye.

Last year, we objected to two of the new developments proposed: the

Glen Ullinish II wind farm and the Ben Aketil wind farm extension and repowering. Our objections were primarily based on the impacts these developments would have on areas of peatland.

We have since arranged to meet with Scottish Greens MSPs Ariane Burgess and Mark Ruskell to highlight the climate policy

contradictions thrown up by onshore wind development on peatland.

We also continue to call for a revision of the carbon calculator to provide planners with more accurate estimates of the carbon emitted when peat is excavated, damaged and constructed upon. The Scottish Government continues to assure us that this is "in progress".

Energy Isles wind farm consent

Last October, Scottish Ministers consented to the Energy Isles wind farm – comprising 18 turbines, each 180m tall – to be situated in the north of the Isle of Yell, Shetland.

In the decision, Scottish Ministers ruled that the off-site peatland restoration measures, which are enforceable as a condition of planning consent, would compensate for the destruction to peatland caused by construction.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and NatureScot originally objected to the proposals but both subsequently withdrew their objections and settled for mitigation measures.

In the absence of transparency around whether conditions are being discharged, we are concerned about the general trend to consent to development subject to planning conditions.

We are also disappointed with the reasoning that destroying wild places can be justified on the basis of ‘compensatory measures’. This suggests that rare, wild habitats, which are a complex web of ecological relationships formed over millennia, can be replaced by managing land to a minimum, agreed standard elsewhere.

The Trust has written to both SEPA and NatureScot to discuss the decisions to withdraw their objections. We also plan to contact the developer to ask how it will be monitoring on-site impacts and off-site restoration.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN FERGOUSON

Masts with no meaning

In the July 2023 edition of *Members' News*, we reported that a coalition, led by the Trust and Mountaineering Scotland, had formed around mutual concerns over the UK Government's approach to rolling out its Shared Rural Network programme.

The primary concern focused on the geographical coverage for 4G mobile signal that was resulting in telecom masts being proposed in remote mountainous areas without any known benefit.

Last autumn, the coalition wrote to Ofcom Scotland and John Whittingdale, then UK Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure. Ofcom invited us to meet and we plan to take up that offer. In tandem, the Trust met Ian Blackford MP, Drew Hendry MP and Jamie Stone MP to discuss our concerns and highlight examples of masts proposed in their constituencies.

The Trust, along with Mountaineering Scotland, North East Mountain Trust and others, has also raised objections to applications. Thank you to all Members who have got involved and responded to applications for masts that concern you. We believe there is still time to persuade the UK Government to reconsider its approach.

If concerned or affected by an inappropriate mast in a wild place, please write to your MSP and object to the local planning authority.



Wind turbines at Stronelairst

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID BALHARRY

Stronelairst planning compliance

In November, the Trust met representatives of SSE to discuss whether planning conditions attached to the approval of Stronelairst wind farm – a site high in the Monadhliath Mountains – had been properly discharged. Partly due to our past involvement on this development, we felt it was important to follow up on whether proper compliance with planning conditions had been observed.

We were shocked to be told SSE appear not have kept the proper records of paperwork required to demonstrate planning conditions had been discharged. SSE suggested

that if we wanted this evidence, we would need to submit a Freedom of Information request to the Highland Council.

This is a serious cause for concern. A lack of transparency around compliance with planning conditions has major repercussions for the environment, rural economies and local communities.

Robust monitoring and enforcement from local authorities' planning departments is essential to the process, especially when mitigation is required. In some cases, however, it appears that nobody is actually checking.

Members meet online for 40th AGM

Trust shares last year's successes and achievements and provides a glimpse of exciting things to come

On Saturday 4 November, around 130 Members joined us online to hear the staff team and Trustees talk about the opportunities and challenges faced by the Trust.

Jane Smallman, the Trust's Chair, welcomed back Chief Executive David Balharry after his five-month absence; Mike Daniels, Head of Policy, reflected on 40 years of advocating for sustainable deer management; while Gareth Morgan, the Trust's new Regional Delivery Manager South, gave an illustrated talk about the importance of conservation in cities and Adam Pinder, Director of Income Generation, discussed the challenges of fundraising and building membership in a challenging climate.

Following these staff reports, Jane explained how the Trust has grown considerably in recent years and how the Board took the decision to delay the AGM to the latter part of the year to reduce pressure on financial reporting. The Board also reviewed the format of the 2024 AGM – to be held online in September again – recognising calls from some Members for a return to an in-person event.

Later, Jane highlighted some of the key milestones achieved in 2022. We acquired a former fish hatchery at Strathaird on Skye which, following detailed community consultation, we plan to develop as a community hub for the area.

Elsewhere, at Langholm, we supported partners in a community buy-out in two stages that will form the new Tarras Valley Nature Reserve; volunteers and staff planted thousands of trees at Glenlude, Schiehallion and Glenridding Common; and the John Muir Award celebrated its 25th anniversary by passing the incredible milestone of half a million awards across the UK.

Highlights in 2023 included the acquisition of a new site at Kylesku that provides an opportunity for inspirational



engagement; in the Lake District, we continue to work with partners on the Thirlmere side of Helvellyn; and back in Scotland, we have taken on the management of the John Muir Way on a trial basis for a year, during which time we will explore whether we wish to do so on a permanent basis.

Jim Gibson, Convenor of the Finance Committee, explained that 2022 had been a better year than expected and how, due to prudence in previous years, we are in a strong financial position going forward.

It was also explained that with four valid nominations for five vacancies, no Trustee election was required. Mark

Held and Carol White have joined our Board of Trustees, while Hermione Lamond and Jane were reappointed to the Board. In addition, we have co-opted two Trustees with specialist skills – Damian Aubrey and Eelco de Jong.

Jane thanked the valued Trustees who were demitting office – Alan Dobie, Emily Henderson, Mary-Ann Ochota, Chris Loynes, Raymond Simpson, Jim Sloane, Andrew Whitfield and Sheila Wren – noting that departures in this instance covered an 18-month

period with the change in the AGM date.

Before the open forum element of the AGM, attendees also heard from Rich Williams, Regional Delivery Manager, about exciting projects in the North region; Thomas Widrow, Policy Campaign Manager, on our proposed Carbon Emissions Land Tax; and David Balharry who re-affirmed the Trust's strategy and the importance of engaging with a more diverse range of people to make wild places relevant to them.

Throughout the meeting, Members had the chance to ask a range of interesting questions. All can be found, together with the answers given, at johnmuirtrust.org/resources/agm-2023-questions



Isaac Johnstone leads a tour of the Trust's project at Thirlmere

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST



Catching up in Cumbria

The annual North West Members Group meeting was held in Glenridding on 7 October and saw a great turnout of Members who heard from a variety of engaging guest speakers.

Rachel Oakley from the Wild Ennerdale project shared the exciting news that the site has been designated a National Nature Reserve; author Lee Schofield talked about the RSPB's work at Wild Haweswater; Cesca Darvill, a PhD student from the University of Leeds, outlined her research at the Woodland Trust's new Snaizeholme site in Yorkshire; and Paddy Deady and John Hincks spoke about the new Upper Duddon Landscape Recovery project – a collaboration between farmers and environmental organisations working to restore nature in the southern Lake District.

Finally, the gathering heard from Glenridding Common Manager Pete Barron, who gave an update on the Trust's

work at Glenridding Common and shared what he, Isaac Johnstone and the team had achieved over the past few years in partnership with the local community.

The day concluded with a discussion over the future management of Glenridding Common and it was clear that while there was understanding on the decision not to tender for the long-term lease, there was also a strong hope that the Trust would continue to discuss the opportunity to be involved in some way in the future.

The following day, Isaac led a tour of the Trust's new(ish) project at Thirlmere – an initiative together with United Utilities and the Cumbria Wildlife Trust that will restore ecosystems across the valley and help provide clean drinking water for communities across West Cumbria.

The group also walked up into Wythburn and were blown away by the potential for recovery of nature in this impressive landscape.

Clear on Deer on tour

The *Clear on Deer* film tour, which took our 30-minute documentary to 11 venues across Scotland and England, culminated in a sold-out screening at Kendal Mountain Festival in November.

Overall, we screened the film and hosted after-show discussions on the challenges and opportunities of deer management in Scotland to more than 500 people, engaging Members, partners and local communities.

In Kendal, wildlife filmmaker and photographer Libby Penman (pictured), who fronts the documentary, joined Trust Chief Executive David Balharry for a final screening and panel

conversation that was full of questions from an attentive audience.

Mike Daniels, the Trust's Head of Policy, who joined several events, said: "It was important to tour the film to encourage debate and discussion around the issues and future of how we



manage deer for biodiversity, climate and communities.

"We were greatly encouraged by the attendance at locations such as Fort William and Ullapool – which are close to our sites at Nevis and Quinag respectively – and to have genuine conversations with all who are passionate about this issue.

"Big changes are happening for deer management, and it is important that everyone has a chance to understand the context and work through the implications," he added.

See the film online at johnmuirtrust.org/clearondeer

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Life begins at 40

Enjoy some highlights of our 40th anniversary celebrations

Since its modest beginnings in 1983, the Trust has gone from strength to strength and now safeguards more than 65,000 acres of wild places with the support of almost 11,000 Members.

Last summer we marked our 40th milestone by creating a special publication entitled *40 years of wild ambition*. The magazine featured highlights of our work to make wild places thrive for everyone. Specially commissioned guest writers captured the diversity and ambition of the Trust's mission to help wild spaces thrive for all – opening with a stirring introduction from wildlife presenter Megan McCubbin and ending with Nav Bakhsh from Boots & Beards who wrote about the importance of diversity and inclusion in the outdoors.

Trustees, partners and staff also contributed, but a special mention is due to four fabulous Members – Carol Goodey, Jessie Paterson, Derek Sime and Marissa Trimble – who spent hours researching our archives, before writing about what being part of the Trust has meant to them. You can read their excellent pieces online.

Our 40th milestone also provided a grand excuse for some celebratory and informative events. Almost 4,000 visitors came to our 10-year-old Wild Space visitor centre in Pitlochry during July and August, where they enjoyed the refreshed exterior and interior plus a special exhibition entitled *What's the future for wild places?*

The exhibition focused on the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis through hands-on exhibits, including a peat core, and an animation introducing our proposed Carbon Emissions Land Tax (see story opposite).

Many visitors were drawn in by local artist Catherine Connacher's



PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN MUIR TRUST

The celebration at Wild Space in August (and inset)



striking window illustration of Schiehallion. All learned just how much we have achieved so far and how much we still have to do for wild places. Many who came were inspired to join the Trust or donate towards our work – especially after having viewed our documentary *Clear on Deer* (see page 5).

The summer exhibition ended with a gathering in the Wild Space when Trust friends old and new reunited for a fun afternoon of reminiscing,

looking to the future and raising a glass to four decades of caring for wild places.

Special guest, and local MSP, John Swinney, remarked how the Trust is one of Perthshire's special organisations – and one that brings him a great deal of pride. "Forty years ago, it was a bold, brave and courageous move to establish the John Muir Trust," he commented. "Its initiatives were not taken seriously, now they are seen as critical. It has been a privilege to observe the Trust's practical work engaging with the local community."

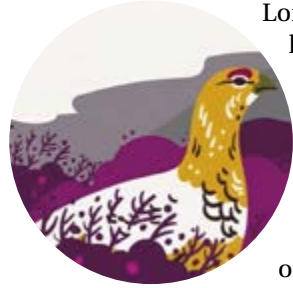
Trust Chair Jane Smallman highlighted some of our recent initiatives and concluded by thanking Denis Mollison (whom we were delighted was in attendance) and his fellow founders for their vision 40 years ago.

For more, visit johnmuirtrust.org/celebrate40

Carbon-linked land tax gaining ground

The Trust's policy work received a huge boost in late 2023 when the Scottish Government announced plans to explore options for councils to introduce a carbon land tax to encourage large landowners to take more positive action on climate and nature.

Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity Minister Lorna Slater said the move should incentivise landowners to restore degraded peatlands and create more woodland – both key tools in tackling the climate and nature crisis. “Nature-based solutions to the climate crisis are essential if we are to meet our climate and nature commitments,” she commented.



The announcement is an important step in our ongoing campaign, which has seen more than 50 civil society organisations express support for our proposal for a Carbon Emissions Land Tax (CELT) – one of the largest groups to publicly back a climate action measure in Scotland.

“Delivering on international commitments on the climate emergency requires bold action,” commented Mike Daniels, the Trust's Head of Policy. “Too much of Scotland's land, especially in the uplands, neglects its huge potential to realise climate and biodiversity targets. We applaud the Scottish Government's intention to address this gap and build cross-party political consensus for CELT.”

If the final legislation aligns with the Trust's proposal, Mike does not see CELT as punitive. “Landowners can minimise their emissions and potential land tax obligation through ecologically sound land management practices, such as native tree planting, peatland restoration and other initiatives,” he said. “Many are already incentivised through government schemes, but we feel an emissions tax would encourage even greater focus on these actions.”

Under the proposal, local authorities would have power to introduce the tax at their own discretion, with all revenues retained by councils. They could then elect to spend the money raised to foster biodiversity, protect nature or reduce climate impacts, such as projects to extend concessionary public transport, energy efficiency and community nature restoration.

The Trust is commissioning a consultation on CELT in early 2024. For more, visit johnmuirtrust.org/celt

Engaging with wild places

After 25 years and half a million Awards, we plan to focus the reach of the John Muir Award across the UK as part of a wider plan for engagement with wild places.

To ensure the Award remains a vital part of our engagement work we are progressing a project to redesign and update it. Once any new structure and plans have been approved by Trustees, we will begin a development and piloting phase.

More than 70 organisations, Award Providers and individuals have offered to help test the Award redesign throughout the UK.

Target 2030

The Trust has joined Education Scotland, Scottish Government and partners to issue a call to action to embed climate change education and outdoor learning within Scotland's curriculum.

Target 2030 aims to mobilise people across education in Scotland to work together for the benefit of people, planet and prosperity.

The goal is to work together to tackle the nature and climate emergencies and ensure that rights, equalities and social justice are at the very heart of what is a crucially important movement for change.

Way to go

The Trust has taken over interim administrative management of the John Muir Way during 2024. A team from across the Trust will work with the John Muir Way Partnership Group to explore options for developing a new vision for the trail and investigate governance and funding models.

The Partnership Group includes representatives from all the access authorities responsible for maintaining this 134-mile coast-to-coast route through Scotland's central belt. Our work will result in a comprehensive report which will inform our decision making on our future relationship with the route.

The Trust recently recruited a dedicated John Muir Way Projects & Relationships Officer, Marina Horner, who will be the first point of contact for any enquiries coming into the John Muir Way website.



North Berwick is one of many stops on the route



PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES BROWNHILL

Hedge planting at Mar Lodge

Getting stuck in

The Trust's North East Scotland Local Members Group gathered for 15 conservation days and three two-day events in 2023 – all hosted by the ranger services at Glen Tanar and Balmoral, and by the rangers and ecologists at National Trust for Scotland's Mar Lodge.

Additionally, the group gathered at the University of Aberdeen for a spring presentation given by a local Trust volunteer, relating his ambitious 45-day circumnavigation of Scotland by sea kayak. In the autumn, the Trust's *Clear on Deer* film attracted an attentive audience including students from relevant courses at both the city's universities.

Tasks during the volunteering days varied from demanding footpath repairs following the ravages of winter storms to the delicate handling and planting out, under guidance from Plantlife experts, of the endangered twinflower.

The group built a couple of new riparian four-metre square deer exclosures and populated them with birch, rowan, alder, hazel, blackthorn, wild cherry and dog rose. They also repaired the 30-year-old existing exclosures, which are now home to a magnificent display of mature trees. Similar tree species were used to plant natural hedges with the aim of improving the future diversity of lowland pastures.

The two-day conservation events include bunkhouse-style accommodation provided by the host estate with the evening session always a relaxing social occasion discussing a wide variety of conservation topics.

For up-to-date details of these work parties and other events, visit johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new/events

Creative Freedom exhibition in spring

Our call for artworks to mark our 40th anniversary inspired by the theme 'freedom for wild places' has received more than 600 submissions from around 400 writers, photographers, sculptors, videographers, podcasters and outdoor enthusiasts of all ages and experience.

A panel of six working artists now has the daunting task of selecting the best of the entries, which will appear in a special Creative Freedom exhibition at our Wild Space visitor centre in Pitlochry this spring.

The panel's overall favourite entry will be offered an artist-in-residence opportunity at the Trust's new Kylesku base in Assynt, where they will work on a project in collaboration with the Trust.

Check out the winning artworks in Pitlochry between 18 March and 25 May 2024 and sign up to our eNewsletter to hear about a series of workshops that will happen during the Creative Freedom exhibition run. johnmuirtrust.org/newsletter



The exhibition will celebrate artwork inspired by wild places

PHOTOGRAPH: LIZ MYHILL

Get in touch

What have Trust Members and local groups been up to? Tell us your news and stories. Email membership@johnmuirtrust.org

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