

Southwest Norway - A Blueprint for a Wilder Scotland?
Lochaber Life- By Rowan Doff



I'm standing at the imposing entrance to a valley flanked by high shouldered mountains, eerily similar in appearance to Glencoe. Three enormous rocky outcrops rise up to my right, while a jagged ridge dominates the skyline to my left, the whole glen drawing the eye inwards as it slowly rises onto the plateau. But something is different. Instead of grassy slopes and bare gleaming rock, thousands of trees cover the valley floor and sides, rising as far as the snow line.

This is in fact Fidjadalen in Southwest Norway, where I recently visited as part of a study tour looking at land use in the region compared to that of the Scottish Highlands. Though the region was heavily deforested by the mid-20th century, a reduction in grazing pressure since has allowed the ecosystem to recover. Today there is a thick covering of birch, rowan, pine, willow and juniper which is characteristic of most rural parts of the area.

As in Scotland however, it's not just farming that prevents woodland growth. Norway is home to large populations of Red and Roe Deer, Moose and Reindeer. All of these are hunted frequently, yet most of this hunting is not carried out by sporting estates or professional stalkers, but by ordinary Norwegians, for whom hunting has been a traditional activity for generations. Hunting licenses and quotas are carefully managed by each region in order to maintain healthy deer populations, ensuring high quality game as well as healthier woodlands.

The climate and geology here are strikingly similar to the West Highlands and our ecosystems are made up of the same basic components. It seems clear that with properly managed herbivore populations, Glen Coe, or indeed any part of rural Scotland, could have a healthy woodland ecosystem like Fidjadalen within a generation. In Glen Nevis, we have planted over 8000 native trees over the past four years as part of the **Future Forests** project, in an effort to restore the area's native woodland. But there's still work to do if we want to achieve something like Norway has.



The ethos that everyone is responsible for the countryside underpins Norway's attitude to landscape conservation. Norway has a strong volunteering culture and much of this is organised by the Norwegian Trekking Association (DNT). The DNT has some 260,000 members, with membership fees contributing towards the upkeep of footpaths, marked ski trails and hiking huts across the country. Owners of private 'cabins' - holiday cottages popular across Norway - must also pay a 'trail tax' which goes towards maintenance of rural path networks.



This is the kind of visitor payback scheme that is badly needed in the more popular parts of rural Scotland. Tourism is no doubt a good thing, but visitors have their impacts and it is usually down to volunteer groups and charities to fix the damage. The Highlands are seeing ever increasing numbers of visitors and around 200,00 people use the main Ben Nevis footpath alone every year. If at least some of the visitor income the area receives could be funneled back into local conservation projects, groups like the Nevis Landscape Partnership could continue looking after our natural spaces for centuries.

If you would like to donate to the Nevis Landscape Partnership, go to our website:
www.nevislandscape.co.uk/support/Give/

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