



New woodland for Eigg

Despite lockdown restrictions, islanders have completed Eigg's woodland creation scheme, as Tasha Fyffe and Iona Hyde report.

The community bought the Hebridean Isle of Eigg in 1997 and it is now managed by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust (IEHT), which is a company limited by guarantee, a registered Scottish charity and a partnership between the residents, Highland Council and Scottish Wildlife Trust. IEHT has responsibility for stewardship of the island, its buildings and natural heritage, and for supporting the sustainable development of the local economy. It owns and manages almost 250 hectares of woodlands, a mixture of young/maturing commercial forestry plantation, mature policy woodland and native woodland including extensive areas of ancient Atlantic hazelwood. In addition to this, significant areas of native woodland are owned by the IEHT but managed by tenant farmers and crofters.

In 2017, a 20-year Long-Term Forest Plan (LTFP) was approved by the then Forestry Commission, now Scottish Forestry. This covered all the woodland managed by the community owners, including 70 hectares of harvestable Sitka spruce. The plan sets out a schedule of general management for thinning and planting which covers all of the IEHT woodlands, along with harvesting

Above, left to right: 2020 was a good mast year for oak; Cell grown trees from the Eigg Nursery; Eigg Nursery polytunnel, summer 2020; Tree planting on Eigg. Opposite: Cattle salt lick tubs repurposed for transporting trees. Photos: Tasha Fyffe and Eigg Adventures.

and replanting the commercial Sitka site. A community tree nursery with a polytunnel and outdoor growing area, managed by Tasha Fyffe, was established in 2018. Producing saplings of local provenance improves survival rates and removes any chance of introducing pests and diseases by importing trees.

Following the approval of the LTFP, Becca Long, IEHT Development Manager, approached the Woodland Trust's Croft Woodland Project for help creating a new woodland on a 30-hectare site at Sandamhor, alongside the existing commercial plantation. Initial site survey and assessment by Woodland Trust with Scottish Forestry identified about half the land as suitable for planting, and an agent was employed to draw up a proposal and take the scheme through the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) process to approval. An approved FGS was issued in summer 2019 for 12.74 hectares of new native woodland planting.

Homegrown help

There are no deer on Eigg and much of the existing perimeter fence was still in good repair, so only 425 metres of new fencing was required. Following completion of the fencing by Eigg contractor Greg Carr, there was a trial planting of 4,000 trees in March 2020. Tasha originally had off-island volunteers lined up to help grade and pack the trees in the nursery, carry them to

the planting site (accessible only by foot) and undertake the site preparation and planting. But the volunteer trips had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the restrictions continued into the summer months, islanders agreed to 'close' Eigg to visitors creating a protective 'bubble' to keep the community safe. Tasha was therefore left with no choice but to organise and undertake the work herself with what assistance she could find on the island. This assistance came in the form of her father—Wes Fyffe, an experienced tree-grower and planter.

As Tasha recalls, "We were going to the tunnel in the morning, packing what we needed for the day and carrying everything up to the site and then planting. You can imagine this was slow progress and absolutely exhausting! My favourite moment was when Wes appeared out of the woods pulling the trees up the hill in a pull-along shopping trolley!"

With the first phase of planting complete and lessons learned, the rest of 2020 was focused on supplying the full 13,500 trees required for planting the remainder of the woodland in early 2021. Autumn 2020 was spent seed collecting and fortunately all species required (except oak) are available in abundance on Eigg. Travel restrictions were relaxed in October 2020 coinciding with a good mast year for acorns, which allowed collection in mainland woods.



The trial planting highlighted a number of issues. The vole populations boomed throughout the west of Scotland in 2020 and the young trees of Eigg took significant damage. Extra stock was factored in to account for losses in the nursery, as well as on planted sites. A variety of packaging was trialled for moving plants from the nursery to the planting site, including banana boxes, but the favourite was found to be cattle salt lick tubs with tight fitting lids—ideal for withstanding a bumpy trip while keeping the trees moist.

Resilience

With the uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic and its impact on another volunteer season, Becca and Tasha took the decision to employ two residents to assist with the planting and another to help in the nursery before the deadline planting date of March 2021. The difficult terrain and distances involved in moving materials on site remained an issue; fortunately an Argocat was found on the island and a driver employed. Without it the project could not have been delivered on time.

The design of the scheme incorporates new planting with existing natural regeneration, areas of wet and dry heath, deep peat and wet flushes to create a mosaic of habitats appropriate to the site. Open space is incorporated to buffer a number of archaeological sites scattered throughout the area. These are mostly hut circles and sheilings, each marked by a rowan tree nearby to ward off evil spirits as Scottish tradition dictates. Other species planted include downy and silver birch, rowan, hazel, wych elm, oak, alder, elder, hawthorn and Scots pine. Vole guards have been fitted to all trees to minimise further losses.

Despite the many and varied challenges, planting of the site was completed ahead of schedule in February 2021. “It has been a huge learning experience to follow through the entire 18 month chain of the project from collecting the seed, sowing, transplanting, nurturing, packing, and planting”, said Tasha. “How fantastic is that?”

Employment

As well as developing the local skills and knowledge required to deliver the new woodland, the project has created employment for five people on the island during the pandemic. The expansion of the nursery will provide on-going employment for the nursery manager and will increase employment and volunteering opportunities in the future. The success of the nursery and the ability to use local labour substantially reduced the costs of the new planting scheme, which otherwise would have been unaffordable in this island location.

The development of the nursery and skills of those working on the project will provide the workforce for further projects over the next few years, as well as securing the means to create a sustainable wood resource on the island. The project and development of the nursery neatly dovetails with another IEHT project, Eigg Woodfuel. Eighty-five per cent of Eigg households have solid fuel stoves in their homes and are reliant on these for heating. Through restocking and restructuring of the Eigg woodlands, the intention is to plant an appropriate percentage of productive species that can be

managed on-island to maintain this supply.

The aim now is to continue to increase tree production from the Eigg nursery; the island could soon be exporting tree stock as well as meeting its own needs. In summer 2020, IEHT successfully applied to Scottish Forestry’s FGS for a 40 per cent grant through the Harvesting and Processing Option for a second poly-tunnel which will increase production by 20 to 25,000 trees per year. The nursery will also start production of commercial conifers to restock the harvested plantation.



The Woodland Trust’s Croft Woodland Project has been instrumental in supporting the project by providing on-going advice, helping secure the FGS approval and providing a loan to bridge the financial gap between initial spend and receiving the grant. Now that the site is planted, Woodland Trust will be assisting IEHT with the sale of the sequestered carbon. IEHT will then invest the income from carbon sales into further woodland and community projects on Eigg, such as building four new affordable homes for rent and the refurbishment and extension of the community hub, An Laimhrig. As Tasha might say, “How fantastic is that?”

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Tasha Fyffe works for the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust (IEHT) and Iona Hyde for the Woodland Trust. For more information on the Croft Woodland Project please email ionahyde@woodlandtrust.org.uk.