

# Knoydart Forest Trust: what monetising nature should look like

*The community of Knoydart demonstrates that people can manage their woodland resource and do it well, as Lorna Schofield reports.*



**O**n the Knoydart peninsula on the northwest coast of Scotland, through community land ownership and management the community has worked to develop the resilience of the land and the community. At the root of their long-term success is the belief that community regeneration is essential to the regeneration of the land and vice versa. In the late 1990s, following in the footsteps of the community land pioneers the Assynt Crofters and the islanders of Eigg, the fragile but strong Knoydart community of 60 were fighting to bring the stewardship and opportunities of the 7,000-hectare Knoydart Estate into the hands of the people.

Whilst a high-profile community buy-out campaign was hitting the headlines, in the background a group of local visionaries saw that regardless of who owned the land the community could secure the future of the woodlands and use woodland management as a tool to bring stability and opportunity to the people living there by providing well paid, year-round employment and strengthening the local economy. Out

of this vision Knoydart Forest Trust was established on 5 March 1999. Thankfully, just three days later the community buy-out was successful and so began a new era of community land ownership and management on Knoydart with the Knoydart Foundation and Knoydart Forest Trust working side by side. Twenty-four years on, the land, the community and the local economy are thriving. Today there are around 110 people living on Knoydart; the community has almost doubled in size and young people are choosing to stay or to return—a sign of success if ever there was one!

The community, through the Knoydart Foundation, is the guardian of a big chunk of the peninsula (there are also large and small pockets of privately owned land). As the community landowner the remit is wide ranging, including housing, property and land management, and through its trading subsidiaries, Knoydart Renewables Ltd. and Knoydart Trading hydroelectricity supply, a bunkhouse, a shop and lots more. The Knoydart Forest Trust (KFT) manages the community owned woodlands on behalf of the Knoydart Foundation through a woodland management agreement. The two organisations work closely

together with shared vision and similar objectives to use the land and resources the community is responsible for to bring about social, economic and environmental benefits.

## Three-pronged attack

The woodland management objectives have not changed since the first woodland management plan was adopted in 1999 apart from the explicit addition of the words ‘climate change’ in its last review in 2017. The three-pronged attack for community, environment and economic resilience has been at the root of everything. The objectives are:

- To enhance biodiversity, habitat resilience and mitigate against climate change through woodland creation and appropriate management.
- To promote, develop and sustain local employment and economic activity.
- To manage the forest by enhancing and expanding the native woodland and restructuring and diversifying the non-native woodland.
- To create a locally useful timber resource.
- To encourage public access and enjoyment of the woodlands.

In the early days, work focused on restoring the existing woodland which

Mixed species restock, Inverie woods.  
Photo: KFT.

## GREEN LAIRDS?

had suffered from neglect over the preceding decades. On the ground this meant a decade of ‘rhodie bashing’—*Rhododendron ponticum* is a significant threat to biodiversity and we have pretty much eradicated rhodies from the Knoydart peninsula—alongside work to restore the historic path and track network in Inverie woods, thinning and starting to expand the woodland area and create a seed source. The vision mapped out by the first woodland management plan opened the door to various funding routes providing opportunities for local employment and the development of skills and confidence of the community in itself and that of external agencies and stakeholders.

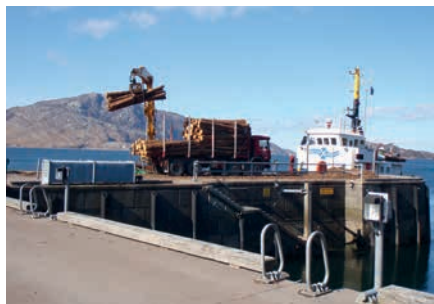
Over the years, through pragmatic and opportunistic use of funding and investment with the woodland resource at its core, KFT have nurtured a circular economy with the regeneration of the land and the community embedded in it. In the last 20 years KFT has brought in the region of £3 million to the local economy. A significant portion of that has been from grant funding however, around 30 per cent is income generated from various activities.

The 240 hectares of Inverie Woods provide the backdrop to the main settlement of Inverie. The woods are made up of conifers planted in the 1960s and 1970s, areas that have been recently harvested and replanted, small pockets of ancient native woodland and naturally regenerating native trees. This valuable woodland resource is managed to provide multiple benefits for now and in the future.

Through small-scale phased harvesting, restructuring the conifer plantation aimed to increase the diversity and age of the woodland and to facilitate long-term management without the need for exporting large volumes of timber and increase its usefulness locally. In the early 2000s, the prospect of how to deal with a conifer plantation that was starting to blow down at an increasing rate was daunting, especially in the context of having no road access to ‘the mainland’ and low timber prices. However, a chain of timely events including a new pier suitable for timber boats to berth, a working relationship



with Scottish Woodlands Ltd, an increase in timber prices, HIE and National Lottery funding to help with infrastructure and a lot of community involvement resulted in a successful first phase of harvesting in 2007. Three phases of harvesting have now been completed with a total of 12,500 tonnes of timber harvested; most of this was exported by boat and sold to big sawmills and around 1,000 tonnes was kept each time to meet local milling and firewood needs in the intervening years. Income from the sale of timber is reinvested back into the woodland and the community.



### Maximising timber

The development of sawn timber and firewood enterprises have enabled KFT to add value to the timber for local use and achieve an array of benefits and resources—employment, skills, infrastructure for woodland management activities, worker accommodation, the opportunity to reduce the community’s carbon footprint by supplying carbon neutral renewable fuel and sustainable timber for building, and the capacity to reinvest the income in the woodland and do more of what KFT does. As an offshoot of the timber processing, KFT’s trading subsidiary, Wood

Knoydart, launched a range of small wood products in 2014 with local makers crafting the products in the community owned workshop in a corner of the woodfuel storage shed using local timber. Support from the Community Woodlands Association was instrumental in the start-up and generous mentorship from Eoin Cox (The Big Tree Society) has been invaluable in the success and growth of the ‘WK’ brand. The products are for sale in the Knoydart Foundation Shop and online, and the WK team hosts greenwoodworking workshops for locals and visitors a few times a year. These enterprises have developed organically at a pace that is sustainable for the available resources. More could be done but more workers are needed and due to a lack of available affordable accommodation and the difficulty in financing affordable housing, it is difficult to expand operations any further.

### Habitat restoration

With access to the land and the autonomy to use it, the community is able to achieve its vision to link up the woodland habitat across the peninsula, and to create stepping stones of woodland so that the flora and fauna can return and flourish, and fragile habitats such as peatlands be protected. So far, the woodland habitat area on community owned land has almost doubled to 1,100 hectares, and in another ten years it will have doubled again. Forestry Commission, now Scottish Forestry, grant schemes have changed names a few times over the years but have consistently supported woodland creation. This in turn has facilitated KFT to employ local workers and subcontractors to build the fences, do the mounding, plant the trees,

Above, top: Timber stack, Inverie Woods.  
Centre: Timber for export. Photos: KFT.

manage the deer and maintain the fences and woodland over time, keeping the money invested in the land, the local economy and local livelihoods. The challenge is how to pay for the 20-30 years of maintaining the fences to keep the deer out until the woodland is resilient enough to cope with deer pressures and how to pay for taking down the fences.

Deer management on the community owned open hill is carried out by the Knoydart Foundation and is still funded by venison sales and revenue from stalking guests. This model has reduced the impact of deer on the habitat but if additional sources of income were available, further reduction of deer numbers could be achieved and woodland regeneration and habitat restoration without deer fences would be a reality.

### Economic resilience

After the introduction of the Woodland Carbon Code (see article on page 19), KFT with the Knoydart Foundation explored the pros and cons of entering the world of carbon finance. Given that creating new woodland and planting trees was already a big part of the community's vision it made sense to stick a toe in the water. The relationship between KFT and Knoydart Foundation adds a layer of complexity to the unfamiliar field of finance and markets so a cautious approach has been taken. New woodlands on community owned land that comply with the Woodland Carbon Code will be registered but at present there is no intention to sell the credits until the community has more confidence in the system. The long-term commitment attached to the sale



of carbon credits is not a risk that the community wants to take at present.

Managing the woodland has enabled the community, via KFT, to develop capacity and resources and to demonstrate that they can manage the woodland resource and do it well. This has led to neighbouring landowners taking on the services of KFT through its trading subsidiary, Wood Knoydart, to carry out woodland management and creation work for them. This work helps to meet the community's woodland management and creation objectives, helping to create over 300 hectares of new native woodland. It also provides employment and generates income to be reinvested back into

the community owned woodland and the local economy. Since Wood Knoydart, a community interest company (CIC), was established in 2013 it has donated over £100,000 back to KFT.

External awareness and appreciation of KFT's work to regenerate Knoydart's woodland habitat

and the public's affection for Knoydart the place, has given individuals the confidence and desire to invest in the woodland through donations. This has ranged from an endowment of £142,000 to co-funding the purchase of a second-hand woodmizer to large and small donations to the 'Plant Knoydar Trees' fundraising campaign.

The community's woodland also provides opportunities and resources that benefit other local enterprises and businesses which further enhances the economic resilience of the community and local economy. A great example of this is Knoydart Tree Nursery CIC which has been set up by a local woman, Jacqui Wallace, to supply local provenance, native trees to meet some of KFT's needs and to sell to local people and land owners. The Knoydart Foundation Ranger Service use the woodland for a variety of events for visitors and locals, spanning from daily guided walks to workshops throughout the year such as foraging and bushcraft. The management and infrastructure of the woodland also benefit other tourism related businesses by adding to the quality of the visitor experience.

What started as a community of 60, including children, having the opportunity to manage 600 hectares of poor-condition woodland has, with a lot of help and support from a multitude of sources, led to a community of 110 managing 1,100 hectares of woodland rich in biodiversity on community land and neighbouring privately owned land, employing four full-time workers and several local subcontractors, a network of woodland paths and tracks, woodfuel and sawn timber enterprises, a wood product brand, and a trading subsidiary carrying out woodland contract work for neighbouring land owners. This is what has been achieved (so far)—is this what monetising nature means to you?

[knoydartforesttrust.org](http://knoydartforesttrust.org)

*Lorna Schofield is Knoydart Forest Trust Manager. To support the woodland and community on Knoydart you can donate to Plant Knoydar Trees at [knoydartforesttrust.org/donate](http://knoydartforesttrust.org/donate) and/or buy Wood Knoydart products at [woodknoydart.square.site](http://woodknoydart.square.site).*

Above: Products in the Knoydart Foundation shop. Left: Path through Inverie woods. Photos: KFT.

