



Fresh perspectives from Scotland

Returning to Scotland after nearly 40 years, John Sargent compares our woodland and hutting cultures.

On August 23, 2023, I stood on the porch of the Hut of Wellbeing in a secluded woodland in Fife. Reforesting Scotland helped me find this special place and meet Andrew Johnson, a pioneer of this initiative. I am involved in stewarding a forest for conservation and in creating small, ecologically designed structures. When planning this trip, I decided to seek out places to visit that had similarities to my own stateside projects and contacted Reforesting Scotland looking to exchange ideas and experiences. While visiting the birthplaces of my great-grandfathers in Stewarton and Doune in 1984, I learned of ecological endeavours going on in Scotland during my stay at Findhorn Eco Village and was keen to see how things had progressed since.

In the past eleven years, during my retirement, I purchased 45 hectares of adjoining forested land in Western Massachusetts. There, my family has a small off-grid campsite with a

yurt, a woodstove, a well with a hand pump and a composting toilet aka 'the pooh palace'. Through direct experience, I learned how to best store and sequester carbon, foster a diversity of species of trees, shrubs, birds and wildlife and manage invasive non-native plants. A local forester helped me develop a forest management plan that includes very little timber harvesting. Two years ago, I came together with five neighbours and a regional land trust to place 283 contiguous hectares in conservation easements, thus giving up the right to develop the land, but still retaining ownership in exchange for tax breaks and partial reimbursements. An official public access trail was created because in the US, unlike the UK, there is no convention of the right to roam.

Help for hutters

Visiting this newly built hut opened my eyes to Scotland's hutting history and the current reiteration of that tradition. I saw how environmentally well designed modern huts can be, including small, efficient wood stoves, locally grown and milled lumber

(larch, for example, for framing and siding) and user-friendly composting toilets. The interior felt spacious and comfortable and had plentiful natural light. I was touched by the story of the Hut of Wellbeing on the Reforesting Scotland website.

In 2021, Reforesting Scotland appointed Duncan Roberts, an architect with over 30 years' experience of working with community groups to develop their ideas for building projects and see these through to completion. Duncan was a student of self-build pioneer Walter Segal and has undertaken timber-framed projects throughout the UK as well as teaching at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. Duncan collaborated with Laura Jaap and Jodie Adamson, formerly of the Cross Cut Co-op, a group of feminist builders, carpenters and educators who came together to form a workers co-operative trading in timber

Brook on John's land. Photo: Jade Lu.

buildings and woodland crafts. As with Cross Cut, Laura and Jodie promote and develop low-impact, sustainable buildings in Scotland, from the materials used, to the way they work, to designing with our ecological future in mind. The aim for this project was to work in tandem with the steering group to deliver a structure that fits perfectly with the site and the needs of its users. The results speak for themselves.

Andrew Johnson

Reforestation Scotland has put together a comprehensive compilation of resources for existing and aspiring hutters. I wish I had that kind of information as I constructed the small structures at our campsite. Eventually, I found sources for locally harvested and milled lumber, including framing and siding in pine and hemlock and flooring in very durable black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). I purchased second-hand windows and doors at Habitat for Humanity's local ReStore; they rescue building materials. Our Bison hand pump is made in Maine, and works in extended below-freezing conditions. Our yurt platform and sheds use removable Diamond Pier Systems to anchor them to the ground. This method is similar in function to the ground screws used for huts. As our campsite does not

have a septic system for grey or black water, the health department will only grant us a temporary use permit that needs renewal every two years. Regulations are often a challenge for people with innovative ideas! I sympathised with Andrew about solving obstacles also discussed on the Thousand Huts blog.

I discovered that issue 60 of this Journal has extensive information and links about composting toilets. Our system has a urine diverter, which makes for quicker processing of the human manure; the solids drop through a chute into a large bin on wheels. It takes two years to process, and the wheels make it easy to rotate the two bins. Urine flows into five gallon jugs for delivery to a nearby facility, The Rich Earth Institute [1]. There it is pasteurised for use as experimental fertiliser. Their urine collection depot is open 24/7 and uses vacuum technology to suck the liquid out of the five gallon jugs into a large vat. The Institute shares their technology worldwide.

Forest health

Hut and yurt living is more beneficial when surrounded by vibrant and healthy forests. I was able to arrange a tour of reforestation projects at the Abernethy Forest in Cairngorms National Park with a seasoned, ecologically minded former RSPB forester. He explained that tourists

are led to believe that treeless heather-covered hills are unblemished beauty. I now know that they are the result of deforestation caused by old and new timber harvesting, grazing by sheep and an unchecked deer population. He showed me examples of successful reforestation with Scots pine and rowan trees, and native undergrowth like blaeberry. Comparing notes, I learned that foresters in Scotland are also using the strategy of placing cut and fallen forest material over seedlings to protect them from deer in place of fencing. The pages devoted to the impact and management of deer on the Reforestation Scotland website really capture the significance of the problem and pose some good practical solutions.

New England's forest health is also impacted by deer overpopulation and the aggressive spread of woody non-indigenous plants which escape from suburban landscapes. These bushes and trees grow quickly and do not supply adequate food sources for many of the insects and other animals. The deer do not see the non-native plants as food and the native bushes and young saplings are eaten down to pathetic little stubs. This severely compromises the ability of the next generation of trees to grow to mature reproductive age. The invasive plants become an even greater part of the biomass of the depleted forest. Coyotes, an effective predator, are moving into the suburbs, but their presence leads to conflicts with the interests of people and pets. I dream of someday visiting the new Dundreggan Rewilding Centre near Inverness; they are successfully educating the public on ways to participate in the rebalancing and restoring of natural ecosystems through demonstration sites and hands-on volunteer work.

The writings of Douglas Tallamy [2], a popular US based entomologist, reveal how native trees and plants provide food sources including nectar, insect eggs, larvae, caterpillars and moths for birds and animals, who also eat the nuts and fruits of these species. His research proves that oaks have a particularly strong carrying capacity. In the Highlands, rowan,



Hut of Wellbeing in its finished form.
Photo: Andrew Johnson.



John (left) with Andrew at Hut of Wellbeing during construction; brush pile on John's land for habitat; the pooh palace! Photos: John Sargent.

silver birch, and wild cherry are good providers. He and many others have begun a national movement to grow native plants, especially pollinator-attracting ones, around every house or building whether in the city, suburbs or country. Tallamy believes that these small 'backyard' environments are like oases that can have an increasing positive impact as they multiply. This trend has given me hope and influenced what my family chooses for our yard. I was happy to see this happening in the UK too.

The Massachusetts Woodlands Institute [3] is an organisation that has some parallels to Reforesting Scotland and the Community Woodlands Association. With its encouragement and resources I have been able to apply for and receive government grants to do

invasive plant removal, forest stand improvement (FSI) and wildlife enhancement. We have been pulling invasive barberry and multiflora rose up by their roots with a maddock and hanging them in crooks of trees to dry out and die without using chemicals. To completely eradicate these plants diligent follow up work is needed yearly. FSI includes selecting desired species and specific individual trees to facilitate carbon sequestration. The saplings and competing trees surrounding these 'keepers' are then cut and either left to fallow for soil nutrition or placed into intentionally constructed brush piles to create habitat.

Visiting Scotland and associating with Reforesting Scotland has given me fresh perspectives. I am energised to discover so many individuals and

projects that are working towards a future more in harmony with nature. I feel part of a larger international community. I am inspired to plant more oak and pine seedlings and support inclusive efforts that give people the opportunity to connect with natural settings.

References

1. richearthinstitute.org
2. Tallamy, D.W. (2007). *Bringing nature home: how you can sustain wildlife with native plants*. Timber Press.
3. masswoodlands.org

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