

Rooted together: rewilding landscapes and rehabilitating community

A story of regeneration, shared responsibility and landscape-scale care, as told by Mollie Saunders.



Change does not just begin with policy or planting; it must also start with people. My work explores how ecological restoration is inseparable from community resilience. Rooted in psychology and grounded in practice, this article reflects on the ways landscape, wellbeing and shared agency intertwine to create lasting change across the Highlands.

My fascination with the intersection of nature, psychology and people began during university, where my psychology studies revealed how natural environments encourage a deep sense of identity, belonging and resilience. This inspired me to pursue community projects aimed at restoring landscapes and collective wellbeing. Though university ignited my passion, it was through this real-world engagement that I learned how to turn insight into action. What began as academic interest soon became a hands-on commitment to place, people and meaningful change. Now, as an Engagement Officer for Affric Highlands, I contribute to a 30-year landscape restoration initiative grounded in the Gaelic principle of *dùthchas*—a deep-rooted sense of belonging and responsibility to place.

Our team collaborates closely with local communities, landowners and businesses to deliver meaningful, place-based environmental recovery. Our work includes the protection of

regenerating trees through strategic fencing and planting native species in areas where natural recovery is limited. Proactive action, rather than reactive management, strengthens the ecological integrity of these sites over time. Across the landscape, this work takes many forms. In the woodlands near Loch Ness and around sea lochs like Duich and Hourn, we are reconnecting fragmented habitats to create continuous green corridors. These corridors support species movement, increase climate resilience and enhance long-term biodiversity. Along riverbanks, we are establishing 'riverwoods', riverside woodlands that stabilise banks, mitigate flood risk and offer shade, shelter and food for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. These corridors support species like red squirrels, golden eagles and black grouse, many of which are now showing promising signs of recovery. Our peatland restoration work is equally vital. Healthy peatlands act as carbon sinks, regulate water and support rich biodiversity. Interventions not only restore hydrological function but also improve water quality and habitat availability.

Crucially, these efforts are grounded in community participation. A recent black grouse citizen science study, supported by local volunteers, recorded a significant rise in lekking males, indicating real-time nature recovery. Meanwhile, collaborative groups like the Glen Urquhart Farming Cluster unite farmers in nature-friendly practices to promote sustainable land management and resilience.

Community connection

While much of our work happens in fields and forests, my role focuses on building that same sense of connection through creative, people-led experiences. Early in my role, in 2022, while working on photography and film projects with children at Invergarry Primary School, I discovered how creative expression could unlock a genuine connection to the natural world. That early work, though playful and full of fun, hinted at a deeper need for meaningful engagement, a need I would see repeatedly as I joined community events and attended career fairs in early 2023.

Through focus groups, outreach and community involvement, I learned the importance of adapting approaches to amplify local voices. A residential weekend I organised in June 2023, brought a group of local young adults together to discuss life and challenges in our rural communities. It was a turning point. I realised that rewilding is not just about bringing nature back, it is also about bringing people home. Many face critical barriers like housing insecurity, job instability and community fragmentation. It is unreasonable to expect advocacy for nature when people are struggling to meet basic needs.

These experiences, from organising workshops to forging genuine partnerships, taught me to see the landscape as an interconnected web of culture, heritage and opportunity. By early 2024, I was actively involved in bridging the gap between policy

Black grouse (*Lyrurus tetrix*).
All photos: Siân Addison, Affric Highlands.

and practice, engaging with initiatives like the Highlands and Islands Rural Parliament with Scottish Rural Action, and taking part in projects that brought conservation into local decision-making. Thirty young people from rural and island communities gathered at Holyrood to voice urgent concerns about nature restoration, housing and transport, meeting directly with Scotland's leaders to call for meaningful, youth-informed change.

Now in 2025, I am supporting the launch of a new platform for youth agency: the Highland Youth Local Action Group (YLAG), developed in collaboration with Youth Highland and the Highlands and Islands Climate Hub. Designed for people aged 16 to 30, YLAG will oversee small grants and develop peer-led projects focused on rural employability, nature connection, biodiversity advocacy and strengthening local ties.

Nature nurtures

At every point along this journey, whether it was a small creative project or a large-scale community event, I have seen the same truth emerge. When people are given space to name their challenges and feel genuinely heard, something shifts. Once the weight of daily struggle begins to lift, what often surfaces is a deep, instinctive care for nature. They recognise not only the damage done to the ecosystems around them, but also the healing those same landscapes offer in return. Science is now catching up to what many have felt intuitively.

Spending time in nature can bring about tangible improvements to both mental and physical health. A growing body of research supports an intuitive concept: that our brains and bodies respond positively to green spaces. One recent study found that a single hour-long walk in a natural environment significantly reduced amygdala activity, a region in the brain associated with stress processing [1]. Another systematic review of indoor experiments confirmed that even passive exposure, such as viewing natural scenes, can reduce heart rate and blood pressure while increasing parasympathetic nervous activity, which helps the body return to a state of calm [2]. This aligns with evidence

that repeated engagement with nature may raise the threshold for stress responses, reducing chronic activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which is often triggered by urban noise and overstimulation [3].

These insights resonate deeply with my own experiences. During community walks, forest sessions and creative projects across the Affric Highlands landscape, I have watched as people visibly relax: shoulders drop, breathing slows, conversations deepen. Natural environments, especially when shared, offer more than tranquillity. They demand less from the prefrontal cortex than urban settings. Historically, we relied on our whole brain, each lobe processing different senses to inform decision-making. Now, modern life demands less of our senses to make a decision and more of a narrow slice of cognition; rather than discerning safe water from sensory signs in our environment, we simply choose which drink to buy. As a result, we overwork the prefrontal cortex, a tiny area of our brain responsible for decision-making. Time in nature re-engages the full brain, sharpening sensory awareness and reducing cognitive strain. It gives the brain a break from overstimulation and, in doing so, supports improved focus and performance. Nature quiets the noise without silencing thought. It invites imagination, attentiveness and connection, qualities that echo in our collaborative work across generations. Here, wellbeing is not a separate outcome but an integrated thread, woven through the quiet, ongoing act of being present outdoors.

To restore land, we must restore connection. Rewilding is a powerful approach which recognises people not as barriers to change, but as part of the process—holders of knowledge, resilience and vision. At Affric Highlands, we have seen that lasting transformation depends not only on ecological restoration, but on the rehabilitation of communities and restoring shared agency, relationships and the capacity to act.

It is not legislation that sustains change, but identity. When people understand the land, feel connected to it and see a future within it, they are far more likely to fight for it. If we want thriving landscapes, we must first invest in thriving communities. The two are not separate goals, they are one and the same.

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References

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Riverwoods Tree Planting.