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Cashel - Forest for a Thousand Years

Contact:

Ross Galbraith, Community Development Worker, Environments for All at BTCV, Glasgow, tel 0141 955 1504, mobile 0776 465 5637

r.galbraith@btcv.org.uk

Or Kenneth 'Monty' Montgomery, tel 0141 956 6816, mobile 07885 962614

Refugees and asylum seekers from the rough estates of Glasgow have been actively engaged in improving the Scottish landscape by planting trees – a universal symbol of hope – on a mountain overlooking Loch Lomond. Cashel Forest is one of many Millennium Forest for Scotland projects, with the ambitious collective aim to restore something of the unique ecology of the Caledonian Forest. It is also the setting for an exciting partnership project, involving BEN, BTCV and the Scottish Refugee Council, which aims to give excluded people a chance to use their skills, as volunteers, to contribute to the conservation and sustainable development of the environment in Scotland, and thereby to aid social integration. We find that this approach benefits not only the volunteers themselves, but also the people in local communities with whom they come into contact.

An important feature of this partnership is BEN's pioneering methodology. We devised a taster programme of activities for refugees and asylum seekers to allow them to sample a range of opportunities for environmental participation. This had the immediate effect of improving their quality of life. Consequently the beneficiaries responded by offering to give something back to their host community. They chose tree planting - a universal symbol of hope.



Setting the stage for reforestation

Trees are the lungs of the planet producing vital oxygen to sustain life on earth. Across the globe, forests are home to an astonishing diversity of life-forms. Yet in many countries, industry threatens these essential ecologies. Vast areas of precious forest habitat are destroyed every day.

“Think globally, act locally” we say. There are some very successful campaigns to save our forests world-wide. I am very inspired when I learn about the non-violent direct action of women in India, hugging trees in defiance of loggers come to cut them down; or in Ghana, where women farmers are re-planting trees to prevent soil erosion, all the while singing “if we look after the earth, the earth will look after us”.

Here in the UK, it is sometimes harder to know what we can do to contribute to this global effort. In prehistoric times most of the British Isles were covered in virgin forest. Trees For Life, the Scottish-based forest conservation organisation tell us that,

“The Caledonian Forest originally covered 1.5m hectares in the Highlands of Scotland, and it is characterised primarily by Scots pines, although it also contains a variety of broad leaved trees. Scots pine is the most widely distributed conifer in the world, ranging from Scotland to eastern Siberia, and from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean. However, within that, the Caledonian forest is unique, because there are no other conifers growing in it.”

Ancient Celtic tribes, the revered ancestors of many contemporary, indigenous Scots, began a process of deforestation four to five thousand years ago, to support their emerging lifestyle as sedentary farmers. Successive waves of incoming ethnic groups which characterise British cultural heritage, have continued to alter the landscape.

“After centuries of exploitation only 1% of the forest survives today, as isolated fragments consisting of old trees nearing the end of their life spans. Gone with the forest are most of Scotland's larger mammal species, such as the beaver, lynx and brown bear, and the ecosystem is now so degraded and out of balance that grazing by excessive numbers of deer and introduced sheep have prevented the growth of any new trees for the last 150 years.”

Now, Trees For Life, Cashel Forest and many other projects like them are forming a growing movement which seeks to re-establish the old forests. Again, I am inspired by the contribution of diverse cultures to this shaping of the local environment.



One strand in a web of natural regeneration

Cashel Forest is one of 77 Millennium Forests For Scotland, supported by the Millennium Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage. Each project is a partnership involving government, local authorities, voluntary organisations and community groups.

Netty works as a Forester with Border Consultants who manage forests over a wide area of Northern Europe. She is responsible for a large number of woodlands in Scotland, Cashel being one. Netty met me at Stirling train station and from there we drove for about 45 minutes through beautiful Scottish landscapes to Cashel. It is a similar distance from Glasgow, on a hillside overlooking Loch Lomond and the Scots often leave the cities at weekends to flock to the countryside. But does everyone in Scotland have an equal chance to benefit from contact with nature in this way?

BEN works with disadvantaged ethnic communities who often live in poor housing in run-down inner-city areas. In 1999, BEN Development Worker Elaine Gibb, working with the Refugee Council in Glasgow, recognised that refugees and asylum seekers, fleeing persecution, torture and conflict in their own countries, and subject to UK dispersal policies, often face extreme deprivation being housed on estates where no-one would choose to live.

Together, BEN, BTCV and the Refugee Council created the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Environmental Conservation Programme to address the need of refugees and asylum seekers for opportunities for social integration and the chance to make a meaningful contribution to Scottish natural heritage. They developed a programme of taster activities, which encompassed both urban and rural conservation volunteering opportunities. BEN co-ordinated the project, the Refugee Council recruited the volunteers and BTCV, building on their existing volunteering programme for the mainstream community, provided the on-site supervision.

The first visit to Cashel took place in January 1999, involving workers from the three partner organisations along with a handful of refugees and asylum seekers who really enjoyed a good day out, helping to plant trees donated to BTCV by various sponsors. They were met by conservation volunteer organiser, Kenneth 'Monty' Montgomery, who takes up the story:

“The refugees spend most of their time in the city so this is a rare opportunity for them to get out to see some of Scotland's finest scenery. We are organising monthly projects to give the refugees a mix of practical and educational experiences including tree planting, charcoal making and traditional woodland crafts. By working with local volunteers we hope these activities will be confidence builders and provide the refugees with a doorway to other opportunities to integrate within the community. If the scheme is successful we hope to extend this type of work to include other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, for instance people with learning disabilities.”

www.btcv.org/scotland/clan/clan2000.htm

Four years later, on a very cold winter's day, as Netty and I drove towards Cashel, the cloud got thicker and lower until by the time we arrived the hillside was engulfed in heavy rain. Still we were able to pull on our waterproof clothing in the barn and, after a quick look at the farm buildings, we enjoyed a bracing walk on a high level footpath in the young forest. Netty told me more about the background to the site. Cashel belongs to the Royal Scottish Forest Society (RSFS – try saying that quickly!) a group of people passionate about trees and concerned about the future of our trees and woods in Scotland. Although in existence for many years, they had never before owned their own land, so they were delighted when Cashel came on the market.

A stunning location on the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond, Cashel was a sheep farm for about a century before RSFS bought it. As with so many parts of Scotland, the land had been intensively grazed so no trees could grow there. On a clear day you would see stunning views over Loch Lomond, like the one in this picture by local photographer, Mary Bates.



Why, where and how

The aim of Cashel is “to recreate a near-natural sequence of woodland types, ranging from oak wood near the Loch shore through pine-birch wood on the slopes to open sub-montane scrub on the highest ground.” This will be managed in a sustainable way, combining timber production with environmental conservation and public amenity. Specific objectives include encouraging conservation, amenity and recreation, enhancing the landscape, using the woodland as a demonstration of good forestry practice, creating access for walkers, making the woodland available for education and research and involving the community. The total cost of the project is estimated at £2m of which £800,000 has been funded by Millennium Forest for Scotland.

Cashel is situated in Scotland's first National Park and there is a visitor centre at nearby village of Balmaha. You can find a map on the website – address below. Local attractions such as Cashel may not advertise their presence by road signs as the Park authorities don't want to encourage big coaches down here, and there is no public transport, so visiting groups have to come by minibus.

Volunteers come from BTCV and other groups and help with planting trees and other tasks. Whilst Netty acknowledges the importance of raising public consciousness about forest ecology, she is also concerned to ensure that trees are planted well and other tasks performed effectively. That is where Monty comes in. He recalls how the second party of refugees and asylum seekers he greeted included 8 or 9 people. Soon, monthly outings were established and as news of them spread by word of mouth, numbers of participating volunteers increased from a minibus load to 40 people – surplus volunteers had to be sent by train to the nearest station where the minibus ferried them the last bit of the way.

Netty pointed out a slate standing stone with a beautiful inscription, and a memorial stone bearing a poem about the uses and beauty of trees. Usually when a donor pays for the cost of a tree for Cashel, they are given a certificate saying where their tree is planted, and perhaps including a dedication to a loved one or some such. These volunteers however were given free certificates in exchange for their commitment to return and look after their trees or help develop the Cashel Forest in other ways. According to informal feedback, Monty told me that while some people came on return visits to plant further trees or to look after those they had originally planted, others preferred not to keep coming back, but to allow new refugees and asylum seekers the opportunity to benefit from the excursions. So all in all, the project has seen quite a high throughput of volunteers. Participants have included refugees and asylum seekers from Colombia, Sudan, Albania, Kosovo, Asia and the Middle East. Many dedicated their tree to people or places they had lost or had to leave behind, but many more made forward-looking dedications to their new found country or the global environment. Monty pointed out that the symbolism of tree planting is universal and transcends language barriers.

The Environment and Ecology at Cashel

The site at Cashel has been designed to allow relatively easy access for leisure visits, but also for volunteers to monitor the progress of the trees that have been planted, and the wildlife as it returns to the area. There is a track suitable for a 4x4 vehicle and footpaths, although I would not say the site was wheelchair accessible, except perhaps for the more athletic wheelchair user.

It is a fairly steeply sloping hillside, with some level areas and some crags and mounds, with areas of acid bog. It is a very wet site, criss-crossed with streams, and the tracks and foot-paths have to be carefully constructed to avoid erosion by flowing water.

These wet conditions are likely to affect the developing ecology, and Netty is particularly interested to study the relationships between landscape, plant and animal life where such water systems are present.

There are already signs of regeneration of grassland among the trees, and at the fringes of the forest, the birches, and at the higher levels rowan trees are spreading by natural seeding. The idea of trying to re-establish near-natural forest is a new one, and there is little information about what to expect, so it has an experimental feel to it.

The part of the forest where we walked in January was mainly planted up with Scots pine. The trees were about three years old and beginning to establish themselves, although they had been struck by a fungal disease which can make them drop their needles. The fungus is airborne, and spreads easily among new plantings of this type. This is a forester's nightmare – of course because they care deeply for the wellbeing of the trees, but also because the funding for these plantings will only be delivered for 'successful' trees ie those which are still growing after 10 years. This is one reason why the monitoring and care of the site is so important.

Issues in Forestry

A Scottish woman, trained in USA, Netty explained to me how forestry methods here differ from other countries. UK is unique in a number of ways – the type of trees grown, the methods used to cultivate them, and the culture of the people and organisations who are stakeholders in forest management.

The method of cultivation used at Cashel is mounding, whereby the ground is prepared by making mounds of soil to elevate the sapling, enhancing drainage and inhibiting growth of competing plants. This does have a drawback for humans, making it hard going underfoot. You really need stout boots to support your ankles if you go 'off-road' into the forest.

Bird life in the forest

A special plot was selected for this project, which participants named the Eagle plot, since the eagle is a bird with an important niche in the forest ecology of Scotland, but who is recognised by people in most countries of the world. There were 200 trees planted there at the last count, and the group had to begin planting other areas once that plot was filled.

Netty also pointed out to me, near the shore of the Loch, places where chestnut palings had been attached to tops of the high wire fencing. The fences protect the trees from being eaten by deer – a major challenge for those trying to re-establish woodland in Scotland. But the chestnut paling is added to make it more visible to low flying birds, including the endangered Capercaillie, a uniquely beautiful Scottish turkey which lives, in small numbers, in safety on the tiny islands in the Loch. I did not see any Capercaillie but I did see three grouse take off from a clump of juniper.

Engaging in activities

As well as tree planting, volunteers have tried their hand at a range of activities, including falconry, to which Netty confessed her ambivalence, but also woodland and traditional Scottish farming skills. Each year Cashel holds an open day, and one year, a group of refugees helped to repair the shieling (a kind of summer house used by shepherds) and to prepare 'lazy beds' (an old fashioned method for growing wheat for whisky). A Somali man recognised the hack (a traditional Scottish tool like a fork but with the tines at right angles to the haft, for loosening soil) as being very similar to farming implements used in his country.

Monty told me that it had been a real eye-opener for him to work with this project. He benefited from the training and support of the Refugee Council, and was surprised to realise how diverse people can be. He spoke proudly of the positive feedback this project has received, with people expressing genuine appreciation for being treated as people for the day, rather than being labelled and interrogated about their origins, which is part of their daily experience. Monty also said he was heartened to see how pro-actively welcoming and helpful the local community could be, coming forward to get involved in skills sharing. This shows that it is not only the migrant communities who benefit from projects of this kind, but also local people who gain from contact with new people, bringing knowledge and skills into the area from the wider world.

One of the aims of this project was to create an avenue in to conservation volunteering for otherwise excluded groups. As such, the take-up has been relatively small, with only a handful of people going on to further volunteering. But one story which delighted me told of a man who, having gained refugee status, immediately got a job, bought himself a cheap motor car and, inspired by the beauty of Cashel, set off to explore the Scottish countryside, hunting for castles and the like.

Future Plans and opportunities

The farm buildings, which I mentioned earlier, are in the traditional style, arranged around a courtyard. Low stables and stalls for lambing and sheering, no doubt, sport wonderfully rustic sagging slate roofs, but are in desperate need of repair to prevent the buildings from falling into dereliction. The RSFS want to restore the farm buildings, maybe for use as an educational resource.

Meanwhile, as BTCV's Environments for All project continues to widen access to Cashel Forest and a range of other urban and rural conservation opportunities throughout the UK, many different ethnic communities in Glasgow are joining in the movement to enjoy and improve this special green space. In April 2002 a group celebrated the Iranian New Year here. There have been visits by a Chinese youth group, an African-Caribbean women's group and a Bangladeshi community group. Some days people pitch in with the work and at other times they may prefer to take a relaxed ramble to the loch and share their picnic lunch together on the shore. That's the beauty of Cashel – people from every community can feel part of it in their own way.

Jack Harper, who works for The Big Issue, has taken some photographs at Cashel Forest with a multi-cultural group through the BTCV's Environments For All Scheme. [Click here](#) to see these photographs.

Other useful contacts: www.cashel.org

www.millenniumforest.com tel. 0141 229 2001

www.treesforlife.org.uk

Trees for Life, The Park, Findhorn Bay, Forres, Scotland, IV36 3TZ

forest regeneration project who produce a beautiful and informative calendar.

Mary Bates, photographer tel. 01360 440203

Scottish Refugee Council , 5 Cadogan Square , Glasgow G2 7PH tel. 0141 248 9799