



# Cairngorms Connect



Forestry and  
Land Scotland  
Coilltearachd agus  
Fearann Alba



Scotland's Nature Agency  
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba



giving  
nature  
a home

## Cairngorms Connect – the biggest habitat restoration project in Britain

Cairngorms Connect is a partnership of neighbouring land managers, committed to a bold and ambitious 200-year vision to enhance habitats, species and ecological processes across a vast area in the Scottish Highlands. Stretching over 600 square kilometres of contiguous land within the Cairngorms National Park, this is the UK's biggest habitat restoration project.

This is a landscape of ancient woodlands, intersected by sparkling rivers and lochs, that encircle an Arctic-like mountain massif. It is the most extensive and wildest landscape of its type in Britain; there are vast tracts of blanket bog, tranquil wetlands and secret woodland bogs. It is home to plants, insects, birds and mammals that are found in few parts of the UK – the area is home to more than 5,000 recorded species; 20 per cent are nationally rare or scarce.

### Cairngorms Connect Project Partners

The partnership is comprised of 4 land managers:

- Wildland Limited
- Forest Enterprise Scotland
- NatureScot
- RSPB Scotland

Collectively, these partners manage 600sqkm of contiguous land. The partnership was founded in 2014 and established a Memorandum of Agreement in 2016.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority is a supporting partner. The Endangered Landscapes Programme is a major funder of the Cairngorms Connect project.

### Challenge and opportunity

Over centuries, many of these have been affected by the past land use requirements of farming, commercial forestry and field sports. As with many parts of upland Britain, land was cleared and drained, and floodplains modified for food production, or for forestry, with plantations of Scots pine and non-native conifers established to boost timber yields. Open moorlands were managed for a sporting surplus of grouse and deer. This land-use inevitably had an impact on the habitats and species of the Cairngorms.

Repairing this damage, across a connected landscape, will deliver significant benefits for biodiversity, atmospheric carbon reduction, climate change adaptation, and other ecosystem service benefits.

We will enhance and expand native woodlands to their natural limit; we will repair damaged blanket bogs and bog woodlands, and restore natural processes to 1,000ha of modified floodplain. Although woodland cover is severely

diminished, impressive remnants remain, and over the last 30 years there has been a gradual increase in extent. The scale and connectedness of the *Cairngorms Connect* area now presents the best opportunity in Britain to restore natural ecosystem processes at large scale, building on already big, though damaged, habitat remnants.

This region is of vital importance to the local community, whether for livelihood, recreation, or because their culture and history is embedded in its forests, lochs and hills. This project seeks to involve local people throughout. It delivers sustainable cultural and social benefits and creates opportunities to become involved in decision-making, participate in delivery, find meaning in the landscape, its origins and future, and establish businesses in forestry, wildlife tourism, deer management, or the many other economic opportunities suited to the area. We will demonstrate how habitat restoration can be achieved in collaboration with local communities, providing nature-based solutions to address climate change and biodiversity loss, whilst benefitting the local economy. The area is also in the most visited part of the Cairngorms National Park – popular for wildlife watching, adventure activities, and simply enjoying the spectacular landscape. The experiences visitors have, and their interaction with this extraordinary area, are key to the work of the Cairngorms Connect partnership.

### **A 200-year vision**

The project has a 200-year vision, shared by all of the partners:

***By 2216**, Cairngorms Connect's woodland habitats are the best examples in NW Europe of an oceanic boreal forest. The forest has extended well towards its natural altitudinal limit, including montane scrub which has become well-established across the montane ownership of the partnership. This has been achieved principally by natural regeneration, in the presence of grazing animals. Limited planting has been used to establish seed-sources for under-represented tree and shrub species, which have become well established. These woodlands – including some plantation areas - have a high degree of naturalness, characterised by structural variety and high deadwood content. Wetlands have water tables at near-natural levels, and attributes of more-natural floodplains and hydrological systems, are well-established. Peatland habitats have recovered from the impacts of historic grazing and subsequent erosion. There are no longer extensive areas of 'hagging'; the blanket bog is actively building. Invasive non-native species are rarely recorded in the project area.*

*The vast area covered by the partnership is internationally recognised as a success in landscape –scale restoration. More importantly, its value for rare and diverse wildlife, spectacular landscapes, sustainable recreation, and for delivering a wealth of well-understood ecosystems services is appreciated by many of those who live near, work in, and visit the Cairngorms Connect partnership area. For those willing to take a sustainable approach to agriculture, silviculture and deer management, there are opportunities to make a modest living from the land – through small-scale, low intensity farming and forestry enterprises.*

***By 2065**, with the exception of on-going herbivore control, all of the principal interventions for ecological enhancement are complete. More natural characteristics are principally being achieved by natural processes. Programmes of tree-planting, ditch-blocking, floodplain restoration, and peatland restoration are complete. The emphasis of the project is now on monitoring, research and promotion/publicity/ demonstration.*

For more information about Cairngorms Connect, visit: [www.cairngormsconnect.org.uk](http://www.cairngormsconnect.org.uk) .

For more information about the Endangered Landscapes Programme, visit: <https://www.endangeredlandscapes.org/>

---

Whilst funded by the Endangered Landscapes Programme, the post will be employed by RSPB on behalf of the Cairngorm Connect partnership (Wildland Limited, NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland, & RSPB Scotland). The post holder will therefore be subject to the RSPB's terms and conditions.



The **Endangered Landscapes Programme** offers an exciting vision of hope for the future in which European landscapes are enriched with biodiversity, establishing resilient, more self-sustaining ecosystems that benefit both nature and people.

The programme is funded by Arcadia, a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, and is managed by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative.