

## CULAG



### Summary

- Culag Wood is situated adjacent to Lochinver, Sutherland in the north-west of Scotland.
- The wood consists of 36 hectares of mixed conifer plantation with pockets of broadleaves.
- The woodland is managed under a 50 year lease from the local estate.
- Culag Community Woodland Trust runs the project.
- CCWT is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status.
- The key aim is to optimise the local benefits from the wood.
- The project was initiated in 1992.

**Why?** Assynt Estates owned Culag Wood before the Culag Community Woodland Trust (CCWT) took it over. The management of the wood had been neglected and it had begun to look uncared for. The wood is clearly visible from Lochinver being situated right beside the village and its current state was detracting from the scenic value of the area. Members of the Assynt Community Council began to think that the local community could manage the wood for its own benefit and in 1992 the community council approached Assynt Estates and Highland Regional Council (HRC), who owned a small corner of the wood, with a view to obtaining a lease.

It was believed that most of the necessary skills required to manage the wood were already in the parish and that there was enough enthusiasm to carry the project forward. Additional funds for managing the woods could be available to a community group where they would not be to a private estate. A 50 year lease with an option for a further 50 was signed with Assynt Estates in January 1996, although work had started well before that through an informal agreement.

**Who?** CCWT exists for the benefit of the local people in the parish of Assynt, Sutherland and for all the visitors to the area. Lochinver is the biggest centre of population but the parish stretches from Kylesku to Elphin and Culkein Stoer to

Inverkirkaig and members come from all over the parish with a few from further afield in Scotland. CCWT is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. There are 8 member directors and 4 appointed directors including the local countryside ranger and councillor, the factor from Assynt Estates and the chairman of Assynt Community Council. The group is supported by the local area officer from SNH and Jon Priddy of the North Highland Forest Trust (NHFT), both of whom regularly attend directors' meetings. There are about 60 members at present.

Local people have developed skills such as timber harvesting and footpath construction in the woods and gone on to apply them elsewhere, thereby contributing to the local economy.

The local primary school uses the woodland and has been involved in the recent treeplanting activities. The playgroup uses it in conjunction with the Ranger Service. The Wildlife Watch Group (Scottish Wildlife Trust) has a small tree nursery next to the main car park and plans to be involved with the proposed woodland work, including the growing on of aspen root cuttings. Many people walk their dogs in the woods.

**What?** The wood consists of 36 hectares of mixed conifer plantation (larch, Douglas fir, Norway spruce, Sitka spruce and Scots pine) with pockets of native broadleaves (downy birch, rowan, aspen, oak, hazel, alder, holly and willow). A few other non-native broadleaves are present such as sycamore and beech. It was originally planted in 1847 but was almost entirely clearfelled and replanted in the mid 1930s. A few mature conifers survive from the original planting. The wood has essentially been unmanaged since the time of the 1930's plantings.

The original paths had become overgrown and blocked with fallen trees. There is now a network of well made paths with new ones being created and others maintained. In the centre of the wood there is a bog which was a small loch before being drained in 1847. This adds greatly to the diversity of habitats within the wood and has a small walkway out to its edge. Birch and spruce are regenerating slowly on the bog (which has a little open water - great for dragonflies) and this causes a management problem or a management delight depending on your point of view.

The wood was fenced against deer in 1996 in conjunction with the Community Council which was ring fencing the whole of Lochinver. All species of trees are regenerating despite the best efforts of several red and roe deer which seem to have both a pass key and the better of the local stalker!

CCWT started out with a view to optimising the local benefits from the wood and this ideal remains unchanged today. The following management objectives are taken from the new community produced management plan:

1. To manage the silviculture in a sustainable way.
2. To conserve and enhance the nature conservation of the wood.

3. To encourage access and use of the woods for enjoyment and recreation, towards fostering love, understanding and respect for the woods and the natural environment in general.
4. To provide opportunities to acquire skills and employment in forestry and related activities.
5. To share our experience and resources and to learn from others the processes involved in community forestry.
6. To maintain and organise administration.

**Vision?** It is hoped that the maximum number of people can enjoy and benefit from what is a precious resource in this part of Scotland. While community groups are always extremely grateful for grants, CCWT is looking forward to the day when it can become self-funding for the majority of its projects and be in a position to help other local groups, practically and financially. It will have to somehow become expert at small scale timber extraction and would be willing to be part of a machinery ring in the north of Scotland. Perhaps in the future CCWT will be in a position to manage more forest land.

CCWT also envisages individuals or small groups using the resources of the woods to develop small businesses and will be there to help provide the necessary training and encouragement.

**How?** After Assynt Estates and HRC had agreed to the lease in principle, HRC funded a consultant's report which was completed early in 1994. A public meeting of interested residents was called and a Steering Group elected. Meanwhile through an informal agreement, work had started on improving the footpaths funded by HRC, Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise (CASE), and SNH. The lease with Assynt Estates was signed in 1996.

The first major task was the organising of the felling of 6 hectares of the wood which had recently succumbed to windthrow, and the sale of the timber produced. For this to happen a road fit to take large timber wagons had to be constructed from scratch. As a first project this was rather intimidating, but urgently needed to be done to clear up the "mess" and provide funds for future projects. The road was built in 1997 and extraction took place in 1998. This road is now the main access road for the public.

In 1996 CCWT became part of the Millennium Forest for Scotland (MFST) group of projects. Management took place supported by a Woodland Improvement Grant (WIG) during 1997-99, organised with the help of Jon Priddy of the then North West Sutherland Native Woodland Project.

Part of the WIG project was the setting up of an interpretative trail called the "All the Time in the World Trail" which consists of a dozen pieces of artwork located in amongst the trees designed to inspire and add to the woodland experience. There is also the nature trail (to be renewed in 2000/01) and an orientreeing course (spelt correctly).

**Greatest achievements?** The greatest achievement to date has probably been organising the clearfell and timber sale of the windblown area.

The greatest challenge for CCWT, which fell mostly upon the secretary John Gibson, was dealing with all the paper work, especially that generated by MFST which is still going on today. MFST's system was so confusing that when the new secretary took over in November 1998 she eventually had to get a representative from MFST to come up to Lochinver and sort it all out for herself (which she did admirably). The confusion was over which projects were in the WIG, which in MFST's contract and which were otherwise funded. It came down to different sections of particular paths - nightmarish!

**Sources of help and advice?** Members have wide ranging useful skills. Several trained in footpath work in Culag Wood and there is now a resident footpath team. There are two rangers and other members of the Assynt Field Club amongst the membership. There are joiners, engineers, half a dozen chainsaw operators (trained in Culag Community Woodland), artists, sculptors, tipi-builders and many more who love to be active in the woods.

In the early days funding was received from HRC, CASE and SNH, with additional help from ACE- HI. The group more importantly had the backing of the local community and estates. Two local contractor/ consultants Bernard Planterose and Martin Howard produced the first management plan and were a huge help with practical advice. Since those early days, SNH and CASE continue to fund projects and training courses and representatives attend most directors' meetings. Jon Priddy of NHFT has been extremely supportive and helpful and is always willing to travel over to advise or demonstrate woodland management skills. He is currently organising a demonstration day for the end of March for small forestry machinery. People from all over the far north of Scotland will be invited.

**Future activities?** There are regular firewood days on the first Saturday of each month during the winter and usually some sort of fun day on the second Saturday of each month. There is a mushroom-log demonstration day planned for the end of February which will hopefully attract a different sort of member- those who are not so able to be active in flinging timber about. A mountain bike trail for the 10 – 16 year old age group is being planned together with some further footpath construction to complete the network. A timber hut is being built in the main car park as a base for operations and for shelter. The group is currently looking into the possibility of having a part-time project officer to co-ordinate all the projects.

The group believes that it is important to have something for all age groups in the woods. There seems to be no shortage of ideas and projects but they nearly all come from the directors. There is a need to get the message across that if anyone at all wants to develop a project in the wood they can. There needs to be a balance of creative projects and fun days. In 1999, a theatre group performed a play throughout the woods with the active participation of the young audience- a truly wonderful day. CCWT would like to encourage other groups to use the wood and is circulating information about Culag Wood to colleges to encourage biological survey work.

**Lessons for others ?** Sometimes the group feels as though little is happening but as with other small voluntary organisations there is only so much time busy individuals can give. It would be better if the organisation of particular projects could be delegated to members other than the directors. There is a need to keep the public well informed so that they can feel part of what is happening, a newsletter is a possibility.

The best advice is that if you are stuck, ASK SOMEONE. Don't struggle and worry - it just wears you out. CCWT would like to network more with other community woods and there is an open invitation to any group out there who would like to visit the Culag Wood anytime.

### **Contact**

Claire Belshaw  
Secretary  
Culag Community Woodland Trust  
Caladh,  
Stoer,  
Sutherland  
IV27 4JE

Phone/ fax 01571 855240

E-mail [claire@caladh.freeuk.com](mailto:claire@caladh.freeuk.com)

Anna Mackay  
Chair  
Red Braes,  
Achmelvich,  
Lochinver,  
Sutherland  
IV27

Phone 01571 844337