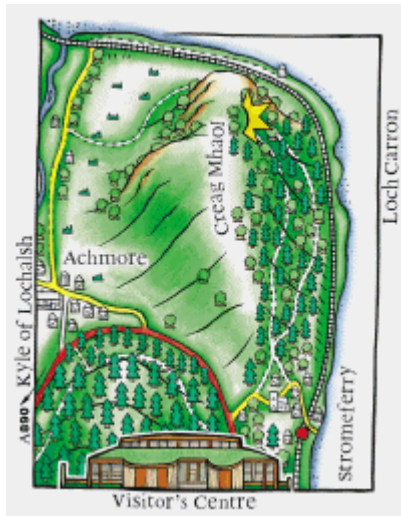


## STROME



### Summary

- Strome Wood is on the south side of Loch Carron, next to Stromeferry in Wester Ross.
- The wood is 30 hectares of mainly conifers of mixed age on steep ground.
- Management is likely to be by partnership with Forest Enterprise.
- Fernaig Community Trust is the community organisation developing the project.
- The trust is a company limited by guarantee.
- The key aim is to revitalise the community.
- Discussions started in 1996.

**Why ?** Achmore village is largely a Forestry Commission village, built in the 1950s. While the village is still surrounded by forest and woodland the only forestry related jobs left in the immediate area are those of 2 stalkers, who between them cover most of Wester Ross. Most of the people living in the village and surroundings have past forestry experience.

Achmore has an unusually high percentage of children and there is concern about local employment opportunities for them in the future. The local school closed about 15 years ago, there are no longer any pubs, hotels or shops (though there is a railway station at Stromeferry) and the village hall has fallen into disrepair. Some members of the community, who have an interest in land reform, decided that they wished to try and tackle the situation and find ways to help revitalize the community. They had heard of the Laggan project and this stimulated thinking about how the surrounding forest areas might again be used to bring more benefits to the community.

**Who ?** The community in this instance is defined (in the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Fernaig Community Trust) as those living within the Stromeferry Community Council boundary. It includes the two settlements of Stromeferry and Achmore. The project aims to benefit the whole of this community and others visiting the area.

The Strome Forest Initiative is one of the initiatives being taken forward by the Fernaig Community Trust, a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Trust has five directors who are elected by its members. The annual subscription is £1, and the members own the Trust. There are currently 43 paid-up members out of a community of approximately 100 adults, and more are expected to join in the near future. The SFI project is run by a steering committee from the membership, 3 of whom are Trust directors. As with most small communities, there is a core of active people who are involved in most of the community initiatives, however, there is general support and interest in the project from the rest of the community.

There is no formal link between the Community Council and the Trust, although three Trust directors are Community Councilors. The Community Council is supportive of all the activities of the Trust and has contributed financially.

**What ?** The original idea was to try and find a way in which the community could become involved in and benefit from the adjacent 1689ha (4,173acres) South Strome Forest owned by Forest Enterprise. After a series of discussions with Forest Enterprise about issues such as better opportunities for local contractors, the focus moved towards the development of tourist facilities.

Current ideas in terms of forestry are now focused on two main projects. One is the development of a shop and cafe with associated facilities. The other is the creation of recreational facilities in a nearby discrete area of the forest called Strome Wood, which is scheduled in the Forest Design Plan as a long term retention. This is not a production area for Forest Enterprise and so alternative management will not compromise the financial output of the forest. These ideas have had the support of and encouragement of Forest Enterprise and a partnership agreement is currently being discussed.

Strome Wood covers 30 ha (74 acres) of a steep craggy north facing slope with spectacular views over Loch Carron. It is adjacent to the road into the tiny village of South Strome with its railway station. What was mostly a Victorian plantation, probably felled during the first World War, was bought by the Forestry Commission in the 1920s. They replanted in the '20s and some planting was also undertaken in the 1970s. It now consists of an attractive mixture of mature Norway and Sitka spruce, western red cedar, larch and Scots pine with younger Sitka spruce and a little beech, birch, and hazel. There is some semi-natural birch and natural regeneration of many species in felled and cleared gaps, giving a fairly intimate mixture of species and ages. Signposted footpaths which were created by the Forestry Commission are now for the most part lost in the undergrowth and one or two clearings have been created by windthrow. There are stands of valuable timber which would present extraction difficulties due to the steep slopes.

Some ideas for the management of Strome Wood have been sketched out and are currently being costed. The general consensus is that the woodland should be managed primarily for amenity both for tourists and the locals. It should aim to provide some local employment through local processing, training opportunities and maximum community involvement. It is intended that the facilities will also attract visitors who will subsequently use the shop and cafe.

The ideas for the woodland include: reinstating and expanding the footpath network, opening up viewpoints, providing a small shelter/seat at the main viewpoint with information, thinning and pruning together with shrub and tree planting to create an informal woodland garden. They also hope to add a small car park and a direct footpath to the village.

A focus for the wider initiative for Strome Wood is a proposed roadside café and shop which will have a forest theme with woodland, historical, landscape and wildlife interpretation. The chosen site is a small patch of Forest Enterprise land beside a key viewpoint on the main road overlooking Stromeferry and the forest. The Trust wishes to purchase or lease the land from Forest Enterprise and run it as a wholly community owned facility. They would like it to be an innovative timber building, with an associated forest adventure playground which would provide a major attraction and stopping off point for passing tourists. It would act as a centre for forest trails and forest recreational activities as well as providing general information on the history and environment of the area. Forest Enterprise is very supportive of this idea and is helping to further its development. It is hoped to develop links between South Strome Forest and the centre in terms of materials, crafts and information.

**Vision ?** The overriding vision of the Trust is to develop projects which will bring local economic benefits and opportunities. At the same time it wishes to improve the local environment through real local involvement and generally promote a more sustainable future for the local community. Community participation in decision making and management will be crucial to this.

**How ?** The sequence of events to date has been as follows:

- ◆ An initial approach was made to Forest Enterprise in 1996 about the possibility of the community purchasing the local forest. While Forest Enterprise was happy to enter into discussions, it fairly soon became apparent that this was not a practical possibility. Partly because of this and partly due to the fact that the community's ideas were changing and developing, discussions moved on to the development of a partnership between Forest Enterprise and the community to take their ideas forward.
- ◆ After about a year of discussing ideas, Forest Enterprise requested that in order for them to be able to take things forward there should be a properly constituted body. It also wished to ensure that the people with whom they had been holding discussions were sufficiently representative of the community and had community backing. During this period the same group of people were also attempting to purchase a large local estate (Fernaig) which had come onto the market and the Fernaig Community Trust was formed as a legal entity to take this forward.
- ◆ In the event the Fernaig bid was not successful though the Trust is currently negotiating the purchase of 82 acres of arable land for the community from the purchaser. However, it was decided to use the Trust, being representative of the community, as the constituted body for negotiations with Forest Enterprise. So, the Fernaig Trust is now negotiating with FE on behalf of the community and will be the body with whom the partnership agreement will be established.

- ◆ A draft partnership agreement for Strome Wood is currently under discussion between the Trust and FE. Once this is agreed, a management plan will be jointly drawn up and management tasks allocated. While several members of the community have forestry skills and already own chainsaws, it is expected that some training and certification will be required to allow them to work in the wood and to comply with health and safety regulations.
- ◆ Forest Enterprise is also interested in working in partnership with the Trust on the development of the cafe/shop/interpretation centre. It will probably supply timber for the building and general advice and assistance. The land will be either leased or purchased by the Trust. At present the Trust is discussing the proposals with the local planning authority and the local enterprise company. If responses are favourable and grants are available, the project will be developed in greater detail with Forest Enterprise. Outline design plans have already been drawn up by a member of the Trust, who is an architect, for a timber built turf-roofed building.

The main **challenges** have been the restricted amount of time that Forest Enterprise and Trust members have been able to put into the initiative. All involved have jobs and other commitments. This means that progress has been a little slow at times.

However, this is not seen by the Trust as a serious problem and during this period there has been growing commitment and enthusiasm on the part of FE and members of the community.

Two of the principle turning points were the first site visit with FE, who as a result became enthused by the possibilities of the project, and the purchase of the arable land. This has demonstrated to the community what can be achieved.

The community has also been involved in a successful lottery bid for refurbishment and enlargement of the village hall at Achmore. The monthly community newsletter keeps the whole community informed about the various initiatives. There have been a number of community meetings at which the woodland has been discussed together with the other initiatives.

**Sources of help and advice ?** There are many Trust members with forestry experience and training and they are conversant with the structure and staff of the local Forest Enterprise District. The group feels that most of the skills needed are available within the Trust (architecture, planning, forestry, etc.) with the possible exception of law and administration. They are undoubtedly envious of Laggan's full time paid secretary and are currently looking into funding for a full-time administrator or project manager.

Apart from the close relationship with FE which has promised to supply as much help as possible in materials and expertise (while the Trust can hopefully access funding not available to FE and supply voluntary labour), the other official organisations with whom they have been in contact to date are the HIE Community Land Unit and the Local Enterprise Company. The group feels that it has had very valuable and generous advice from Laggan, Abriachan, Cairnhead and other community woodland groups which it has contacted.

No other potential sources of funding have been pursued to date as the group recognises the need for plans, proposals and agreements to be made more concrete before applications can be made.

**Future activities ?** There is now sufficient community enthusiasm for the project for the momentum to be sustained even if some of the prime movers were to drop out. Older members of the community are becoming more enthused and will no doubt provide further expertise and help. When the time comes to produce a management plan for the woodland, this may be undertaken through a structured exercise such as Forests for Real. There are already good lines of communication within the community and most of the key issues have been tackled through discussion already.

**Lessons for others ?** As this project is still in its early stages there are undoubtedly many lessons to be learned but two key ones are:

- the value of networking and seeking advice from other initiatives
- the value of maintaining a clear dialogue with potential partners and with the wider community.

### **Contacts**

Colin Parsons  
6 The Square  
Achmore  
Stromeferry  
IV53 8UN

Tel: 01599 577236  
e mail: [col-jack@talk21.com](mailto:col-jack@talk21.com)

Robin Phillips  
An Sidhean  
Achmore  
Stromeferry  
Ross-shire  
IV53 8UN

Tel: 01599 577200