

SUNART



SUMMARY

- The Sunart Oakwood Project is on the south side of the Ardnamurchan peninsula.
- The project area extends to 1318 hectares. It is 70% conifer, 19% native broadleaves and 11% open ground.
- The woodland is managed by a partnership of the local community, Forest Enterprise and others.
- The Steering Group of the partnership directs the project.
- The partnership is informal and unconstituted.
- The key aims are to restore the Atlantic oakwood habitat, to manage the woodland sustainably to support the local economy and to learn about the woodland's biodiversity and history.
- The idea had its origin in 1994.

Why? The idea for the project originated in 1994 when Forest Enterprise (FE) consulted the local community on plans to restore an ancient oak woodland at Sunart on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. There was a strong desire within the community to create local employment. This is a community which understands forestry, in fact many older members of the community had been involved in planting some of the early plantations. Training in forestry skills was seen as a way to encourage the development of new businesses. Restoration and employment became the principal foci of the project. In addition, the community was keen to develop greater participation by the local primary schools in the forest.

The project has been characterised from the outset by a positive attitude within both FE and the community towards a partnership approach. This has enabled new opportunities to emerge. FE and the community have been joined by several other agencies and interest groups. Together, this has evolved into the Sunart Oakwoods Project.

Who? The local community is based around the villages of Glenborrodale, Salen, Strontian and Acharacle on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. This is an economically fragile area which

has been identified as a pilot site for the European funded 'Initiative at the Edge'. Gaelic is spoken throughout the area which has a rich cultural identity. The main sources of employment are tourism, fish farming, agriculture (crofting), game shooting and public services.

The Acharacle Community Council (ACC), which provides the focus for local involvement in the partnership, serves a resident population of around 800, rising in summer as the large number of holiday properties become occupied. Help from the Initiative at the Edge steering group has provided a mechanism for wider community contact, through regular public meetings. This has speeded up the development of the project.

The ACC discusses the project at its monthly (open) meetings and exchanges ideas between local people and the partnership. Information is passed on via monthly newsletters, the local press and display boards as well as by word of mouth. Minutes of meetings are posted in the local libraries. Information days are held every six weeks to provide training and information on topics of special interest. These may take the form of group visits or lectures by guest speakers. Events are held which attract different groups within the local community and visitors to the area.

The partnership has developed in a very informal way. The main partners are the local community represented by ACC, FE, local landowners, SNH, Highland Council and the Local Enterprise Company. Several of the funding bodies are included in the partnership. Other interest groups are involved as appropriate, sometimes on sub-groups.

There is no constituted structure such as a trust. The Steering Group oversees the whole project and is chaired by John Risby from FE. This group directs the development of the project, identifies future funding possibilities and co-ordinates sub-groups, such as the Deer Group, Skills and Training Group and Archaeology Group. The Steering Group also directs the work of the recently appointed Project Manager, Jamie McIntyre.

What? The woodland is made up of Atlantic oakwood, open ground and planted conifers. Its location is between Glenborrodale and Strontian on the northern shores of Loch Sunart, which separates the Ardnamurchan and Morven peninsulas on the west coast of Scotland. The FE woodland area is 732 ha consisting of 70% conifers, 19% native broadleaves and 11% open ground. This is managed in conjunction with a further 586 ha of privately owned native woodland and open ground. Much of the native woodland is dominated by sessile oak which was worked for coppice nearly 200 years ago. The secondary species is downy birch with alder, ash, wych elm, rowan, holly, willow, hazel and bird cherry also present.

The flora is particularly rich in epiphytes and this together with the presence of other habitats has resulted in the site being designated as an SSSI and a cSAC. The site is an ancient woodland which had been managed in the past for charcoal production and more latterly as crofting land until acquired by the Forestry Commission (FC) in 1951. The FC undertook considerable conifer planting throughout the oakwood between 1951 and 1971. The original objective for the woodland was to restore the oakwood by removing conifers and rhododendrons. To this has been added the objectives of maximising local benefit and providing access for multiple uses.

Vision? The vision has three elements. Firstly, to restore the Atlantic oakwood habitat. Secondly, to manage the woodland sustainably to support the local economy. Thirdly, to give access to the woodland to learn about its biodiversity and history.

These objectives are listed as:

- Restoration of the Atlantic oakwood habitat.
- Training for local people in forestry and land management.
- Support new business enterprises for wood products.
- Involvement of schools
- Develop access to woodlands for the interpretation of natural and cultural history.

How? The project began in 1994 with the consultation by FE on restoration plans for the oak woodland. During this process the local community clearly stated its interest in being involved, as there was a serious need for local employment. There had been little management activity by FE in the project area for quite a while and therefore little previous discussion with the community on management issues. Several open meetings enabled local people to become engaged and ideas to come forward.

FE developed a funding package and produced a management plan. Through the partnership, the community has shaped the Forest Design Plan through consultation and a Planning for Real exercise; initiated local training and employment; set out a framework for school activity and developed a Millennium Awards project to research the history of the woodlands.

The project has expanded, taking on a wider rural development role, by being incorporated into the Initiative at the Edge project. The emphasis now is moving from the initial aims of providing direct employment alongside the restoration of the woodland, to other uses of the diverse woodland resource and tourism.

It was also recognised early on that knowledge and understanding of the local woodland by all age groups was important, to ensure that the woodland resources are managed sustainably and for the greatest benefit of the community. Of particular importance is the involvement of the four primary schools in the area. Initial involvement began with informal guided walks and class work on the wildlife and history of the woodlands. School children have been encouraged to express their views on the future management of the woods, such as providing ideas on the designs for car parks and interpretation facilities. There is a Gaelic Medium Unit within Acharacle Primary School which is exploring the cultural aspects of the woodland's history.

A Project Manager has recently been appointed to take the rural development aspects of the project forward. He has been appointed by FE on behalf of the partnership. His main responsibilities will be to ensure sustainable management and to increase community involvement by encouraging local use of timber, working with crofters to expand the woodland area and co-ordinating the various aspects of the project.

The **milestones** have been:

1. FE began to formulate restoration plans in 1994.
2. Securing MFST (1996) and LIFE (1997) funding for restoration work.
3. First school visit to see horse logging in 1997.
4. Preparing and receiving endorsement of a management plan in 1998.
5. First 4 local men trained as chainsaw operators in 1998.

6. Launch of Initiative at the Edge and incorporation of the Sunart project into this wider rural development initiative in 1998.
7. Securing Leader II funding for recreation and interpretation development in 1999.
8. Completing management agreements with 6 neighbouring landowners and formation of Deer Control Group in 1999.
9. Securing Rural Challenge funding for the Acharacle training and skills development project in 1999.
10. Support for the Moidart Horselogs.
11. Appointment of the Project Manager in 1999.
12. Investigation of oak sawmilling in Ardnamurchan.
13. Development of a Millennium Awards project in 1999 to research the archaeology and history of the woodlands.
14. Development of forest walks.
15. An area of forest next to Acharacle Primary School was handed over in 1999 to the community by the local estate as a Millennium gift.
16. A Training and Skills Coordinator was appointed in November 1999.

The project has evolved in an informal way and there have been no great obstacles to overcome. The only problem of note has concerned the extraction of timber from an area covered by a nature conservation designation. This situation is being discussed with SNH in order to find a solution which suits everybody.

Greatest achievements? The greatest achievement has been seeing the tangible results already coming from the project. This demonstrates that there are many real benefits for the local community.

The most challenging aspects have been securing funding and developing effective two-way communication. On the whole securing funding has not been too arduous as several of the agencies in the partnership have provided funding or have made the funding applications. As time has gone on the funding has become very complex. The most difficult funding to secure has been for access, interpretation, training and facilitating community involvement. This has been helped by raising the public profile of the project and through becoming involved with Initiative at the Edge. Effective communication has resulted from the agencies listening to the community.

Sources of help and advice? Most of the skills required have been accessed from within the partnership. There has been no need to look further afield largely due to the diverse range of agencies and individuals involved. The profile of the project has been raised by linking up with other initiatives.

To date the main funders have been FE, MFST, LIFE, LEADER II, SNH, Highland Council, FC, Crofters Commission, Lochaber Ltd. and the Rural Challenge Fund. Training needs were identified early on and courses have been established. Many people already had the skills but needed to be covered by certification to be employed. The provision of training has been demand lead. So far about 20 people have received training in areas such as chainsaws, pesticides and fencing. This has enabled them to set up as self-employed contractors. Future training will include the development of final products. The training of local people has coincided with the restoration of the woodland. This is ongoing and provides steady work such as the cutting of conifers and rhododendrons and the control of grazing.

Future activities? Ongoing activities include the training programme for forestry and land use skills, a series of school visits and practical activities, the development of access and interpretation facilities and the involvement of the wider community.

There are plans for a Forest School building, to be build from local timber and designed as a focal point for education within the woodland. Appropriately designed chalets, again built out of local timber, will increase the attractiveness of the area for tourists. As the project evolves, new ideas are developing and different groups of people are becoming involved.

Lessons for others? The most important lesson has been the value of a positive attitude towards working together, by all groups involved. This has been facilitated by wide consultation and general discussion so that as many people as possible in the community have had the opportunity to be aware of developments and to become involved. As a result the full benefit to the whole community is being realised.

Contacts

Sheila Nairn
Chairperson
Acharacle Community Council

Phone 01967 431248
Fax 01967 431732
Email sheila@kentra.fsnet.co.uk

John Risby
FE Forest District Manager
Torlundy
Fort William
Inverness-shire
IV25 3PW

Phone: 01397 702184
Fax: 01397 700179
Email: john.risby@forestry.gsi.gov.uk