

Report on MCW trip to Mull's Community Woodlands - 12th March 2016

Attending: Angus Robertson, Claire Holohan, Alasdair, Donald, Bonnie, Veronique, Sam, Claire Manthorpe, Mike Foulis, Gill Foulis, Freda Beston, John Hodgson, Kirsty MacIntyre

Introduction

This was a very successful trip both for information gathering and opportunities for discussion amongst the attendees.

The two woodland development companies were quite different and it was useful to see the similarities and the differences.

Below is a summary of some of the key points of most relevance to Morvern and the stage we are at with our consultation and research. This is followed by a summary of the potential action points to take forward.

North West Mull Community Woodlands Company

nwmullwoodland.co.uk

We were met in Dervaig by Malcolm Ward and John Morrison (vice chair)

North West Mull Community Woodland Company purchased 694 hectares of woodland in 2006 for less than £400k. This value reflected the difficulty in extracting. Since then they have built a haul road to enable extraction (with partial funding), have established woodland crofts and are running a successful wood fuel business as well as continued commercial woodland operations. They are planning on creating a woodland burial site, building a hydro, a large wood shed for drying etc, affordable housing and housing plots and amenity woodlands.

The purchase has directly created three jobs. A full time forest manager, a part time administrator and a full time wood fuel supplier. All extraction has been contracted out, but some has gone to local contractors creating jobs indirectly.

It has also created more jobs indirectly through an increase in the population of Dervaig.

The commercial woodland was just covering costs, however they have had to borrow approx. £1.4m for the haul road against the sale of timber.

The wood fuel business had been partially reliant on volunteers but was now making a profits.

Their research showed the woodland burial ground would make a small profit.

By far the most profitable venture will be the introduction of a hydro scheme.

They informed us that woodland crofts take five years to set up with the crofting commission.

They stressed the importance both of a good management plan but also expecting this plan to change dramatically over the years.

The woodland itself is now predominantly clear fell because of having to fell to repay the loan for the haul road.

South West Mull and Iona Development Company (Tiroran Forest)

swmid.co.uk

We were met by Morvern Gibson (equivalent to Lilia at SWMID), John Clare (Forest Officer) and Colin MacDonald (Chair)

Tiroran Forest was purchased in November 2015 for approx £900k and is approx. 760 hectares. £200k of this was a loan against the cost of timber.

The timber at Tiroran is of high quality and the woodland relatively commercial. Only fourteen people live locally so some of the profits will feed into projects across South West Mull and Iona.

The plans for the forest are a wildlife visitor centre (specifically to see white tailed sea eagles), extensive paths and trails, a forest schools area with possible woodland crofts to be established in the future and continued commercial woodland operations.

The purchase had already provided two new jobs; a Forest Officer and by providing funds for a administrator for Morvern Gibson.

The timber extraction contract has been awarded to Tillhill who also extract from North West Mull.

They stressed the importance of negotiating with the district valuer and also developing the woodland into compartments. Compartmentalising the wood was also a useful tool in community consultation. (Some community woodlands have managed to get woodland valued by compartment).

In both woodlands having a forestry officer or forest development manager who not only understands commercial forestry, native woodland regeneration and bio-diversity issues, but also is good at community liaison seemed really important.

Morvern Gibson stressed the importance of hiring the right Forestry Consultant in the early stages of the process as this is a close working relationship.

Comparing the Woodlands

Although of comparable size there were many differences between these two woodlands, their management, and the communities surrounding them.

Both projects were triggered by the woodland going on sale on the open market which effectively triggered the community to act.

Both projects had similar management structures (which are replicated through many community woodlands) of a single Forest Development Manager with a background in ecology handling the management and regeneration of native woodlands while all commercial extraction and replanting was contracted out to Tillhill as a result of a tender process (as mentioned above in the case of NWMCDC some of this was to a local contractor/micro harvester). The Forest Manager was managed by a board of volunteers.

Both purchases had directly resulted in a minimum of two local jobs and in both instances the woodlands were being managed with the aim of being both commercially and ecologically sustainable.

Both purchases had also allowed for the clearing of sites of historical interest.

Resources

It was clear from the visit that we have almost all the resources in place needed to purchase an area of woodland at least of the scale of Tiroran or NWMCDC.

- An existing community development company with a paid member of staff
- Committed and enthusiastic volunteers
- Existing skillset within the community (i.e. several woodland ecologists)
- Experience of community liason and fundraising
- Experience of owning and managing woodland (albeit on small scale)
- Experience of the creation of amenity woodland
- A small local sawmill
- Experience of the National Forest Land Scheme and Big Lottery Fund applications etc

MCW also own a tractor, grapple loader and woodmeizer for small scale harvesting/milling.

Next steps and Questions

The next steps are to identify which community benefits the woodland could provide which meet the needs for the Morvern community. From this point which areas of woodlands might meet these needs. Based on the consultation we have already done there seems to be a definite need or demand for:

- Direct and indirect employment opportunities
- Sustainable community income (from commercial forestry, a hydro scheme, woodland burials)
- The creation of crofts and/or affordable housing plots
- A non-domination site for burial
- Better access to the woodland
- Local timber for wood fuel

There are also other uses worth investigating which may provide opportunities for employment and enhance the local economy.

These could be opportunities for local small enterprises leasing parts of the woodland.

There are many parts of Fuinary Forest and other woodland in Morvern that could provide this.

The major question now is what scale of purchase?
The main issues to consider are:

- Financial risk
- Available funding
- Woodland available for purchase
- Scale of community interest/voluntary capacity

As well as discussing these points I propose as immediate next steps inviting Clare Munro, John Hollingdale from CWA, Gary Servant from Upland Ecology and Forest District Manager from the FC to come and talk to the steering group.