

# JOHN MUIR TRUST MANIFESTO 2021

## Scotland's land, communities and nature

### Foreword



The 2021 Scottish General Election will take place at a time of great change and upheaval worldwide. Questions of momentous importance to us all will be debated in the coming months: Scottish independence; the consequences of Brexit; the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on society; and of course, the climate emergency.

As a charity with members and supporters across the political spectrum, the John Muir Trust does not endorse any party or candidate, nor do we take a stance on the major constitutional questions facing Scotland and the UK. Our focus is on land, nature and the environment. These are of vital importance to the people of Scotland.

The John Muir Trust owns and manages around 25,000 hectares – 250 square kilometres – of mainly wild and rugged land in Scotland, including some of our most spectacular hills and mountains such as Ben Nevis; Schiehallion; Bla Bheinn, Glamaig, and Marsco on Skye; Ladhar Bheinn in Knoydart, and Quinag in Assynt.

We work closely with Scotland's biggest community landowners, including the North Harris Trust, the West Harris Trust, the Galson Estate Trust (Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn), the Knoydart Foundation and the Assynt Foundation, and we worked closely with the people of Langholm to help bring about the biggest community land buy-out ever seen south of the Great Glen.

We also run the John Muir Award scheme, which daily brings people – especially young and disadvantaged people – and nature together in almost every corner of Scotland, as well as in many parts of England and Wales. In 2019, 20,758 people completed a John Muir Award across all 32 local authority areas, including over 5,000 from disadvantaged backgrounds.

With decades of experience behind us, we have set out a series of eight ambitious but practical measures that could help transform Scotland's natural environment for its local people and visitors; to accelerate towards net zero carbon; and to breathe new life and opportunity into our most fragile communities.

Scotland's natural scenery is world famous and tourism is a major driver of our rural economy, albeit one with challenges as well as opportunities for local communities. There is, however, a bleaker side to the picture that is less familiar to tourists, or even to many people who live in this country.

Much of our land is ecologically impoverished because of the way it has been managed over the last 250 years. It is barren, overgrazed, burned, drained, bereft of wildlife and depopulated. In recent decades, that damage has been compounded by intensified commercial development driven primarily for profit. We want to improve the land, create new employment and ensure that it contributes effectively to climate mitigation.

We hope you are inspired or challenged by the measures below and we would be delighted to meet with you sometime in the near future to discuss these ideas in more depth.

Yours sincerely,



**Dave Gibson**  
Chair, John Muir Trust

**JOHN  
MUIR  
TRUST**

# 1. Maximise natural carbon capture and storage from our land through a banded tax system

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The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 sets a bold target to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2045 at the latest. This will require a major shift in the use of our resources, not least in the way we manage our land.

Scotland has immense potential to deliver large-scale natural carbon capture. Over 38,000 sq. km of our landmass (four times greater than in England) is classified as ‘rough grazing’ – i.e. of marginal agricultural value. Much of that land is currently managed for sports shooting of deer and grouse and failing to deliver climate and biodiversity targets.

We currently have incentive schemes in place for peatland restoration and woodland creation, but we know from experience that taxation too can be a powerful public policy tool for changing behaviour.

To that end, we propose phasing in a carbon tax for large-scale landowners in every part of Scotland starting with a pilot scheme on properties in excess of 10,000 ha before rolling it out to all landholdings in excess of 1,000 ha. Land owned by local authorities, housing associations, community land trusts and other agencies that supports essential services such as housing, schools and hospitals would be exempt from the tax.

Based on hectareage, every landholding over 1,000ha would be assessed for actual and potential carbon emissions and sequestration by expert consultants, then placed in a graduated tax banding scheme collected and administered by local authorities.

We further propose that all tax revenues raised be paid into a dedicated carbon capture fund to provide additional funding streams to support woodland expansion and peatland restoration programmes to assist farmers, crofters, community land trusts and other small landholders to make the transition to net zero land use.

We believe that a collective effort along these lines, involving the Scottish Government, the Scottish Land Commission, Community Land Scotland, Forestry and Land Scotland, the Just Transition Commission, environmental NGOs, and individual landowners, could bring new hope and optimism to rural Scotland; drive forward the re-peopling of our glens; and become an international showcase contributing to progressive global change in land use and management.



Bogbean growing in a pool on bog peatland, Flow Country, Sutherland

PHOTOGRAPH: MARK HAMBLIN/SCOTLANDBIGPICTURE.COM

**“The UK’s net-zero target will not be met without changes in how we use our land. Those changes must start now.” – Committee on Climate Change, January 2020**

## 2. Develop a strategy for Scotland's Wild Land Areas with the aim of realising their environmental, ecological, educational, health and economic potential

In 2014, the Scottish Government recognised 42 Wild Land Areas in Scotland, characterised by their sense of remoteness, solitude, ruggedness and, in many places, challenging terrain. Although their history means these may not be pristine wildernesses as exist in parts of North America and Scandinavia, they do have outstanding potential to deliver multiple benefits nationally, as well as locally, across Scotland's most sparsely populated areas.

While the Wild Land Areas have served a helpful role in planning policy, they have far more to offer. Models for what can be achieved already exist in community-led ecological restoration including:

- The Yearn Stane Project within the Waterhead Moor-Muirshiel Wild Land Area
- The Coigach-Assynt Living Landscape Partnership in the Inverpolly-Glencanisp and Quinag Wild Land Areas
- The North Harris Trust in the Harris-Uig Hills Wild Land Area
- The Nevis Landscape Partnership in the Rannoch-Nevis-Mamores-Alder Wild Land Area.

A coherent strategy drawn up in collaboration with communities, local councillors, landowners, businesses, environmental NGOs, recreational organisations and academic institutions (e.g. SRUC and UHI) could deliver multiple policy objectives including:

- Revitalised ecosystems, including woodland and peatlands, reversing biodiversity loss and helping Scotland achieve its net zero carbon emissions target before 2045
- Stronger local economies through the creation of nature-based jobs and enterprises
- Repopulation of some of Scotland's abandoned glens
- Better connections between people and nature, with attendant health and educational gains
- More training and educational opportunities in rural, woodland, visitor management and outdoor recreation skills
- Reduced pressure on National Parks and other tourist hotspots as a result of the higher profile of Scotland's Wild Land Areas.



On the way to the Muirshiel Visitor Centre in Scotland's largest regional park

“Wild land is often associated with moorland and peat. Here the opportunity is for achieving carbon targets, where the role of peatlands in flood alleviation, biodiversity enhancement and carbon sequestration goes hand-in-hand with protection of wild land.” – Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park

### 3. Create six dedicated John Muir Award Development Officer posts covering all 32 of Scotland's local authority areas

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The John Muir Award is a free at the point of delivery, non-competitive and inclusive environmental award scheme that encourages people to enjoy and care for wild nature. It is part of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, delivered in almost half of all secondary schools, one in five primary schools and one in 20 special schools. In 2019 over 20,000 individuals completed a John Muir Award in Scotland.

The Award helps:

- Achieve the Government's commitment to Learning for Sustainability and eight of the Government's 16 National Outcomes
- School students and other young people (as well as families and adults) connect to nature and climate action
- Reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

In East Ayrshire, where the council has funded a dedicated 'John Muir Award and Attainment East Ayrshire Project Officer', the results are especially impressive. In 2017-2018, 46 per cent of East Ayrshire Primary Schools and 55 per cent of Secondary Schools offered the John Muir Award. Of these, 37 per cent of pupils were from seriously disadvantaged backgrounds – up from 28 per cent the previous year.

By providing funding for a dedicated John Muir Award Development Officer in each of the six Regional Improvement Collaboratives tens of thousands more young people across every local authority area would benefit, with far reaching educational and health benefits.



PHOTOGRAPH: LOCH LOMOND & THE TROSSACHS NATIONAL PARK

John Muir Award participants on Conic Hill in the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park

“I am very pleased to see the growth in pupils working to achieve a John Muir Award in schools. Its popularity, especially with pupils living in deprived areas, indicates that the Award is aiding improvements in literacy, numeracy, physical and mental health.” – John Swinney, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Education

## 4. Appoint an independent working group to develop a spatial strategy to ensure that areas valued for their ecological, landscape and wildness qualities are protected from large-scale development

The John Muir Trust fully supports the Scottish Government's drive to achieve a net-zero carbon economy by 2045, or sooner, and we recognise that the move away from fossil fuels towards a fully decarbonised electricity sector is necessary if we are to meet this target.

We note that, according to the Scottish Government's Annual Energy Statement 2019, Scotland is already on target to run on 100 per cent renewable electricity generation. We recognise too that future advances in transport and heating will require further renewables capacity, as well as action to reduce energy consumption.

While there has been welcome progress in recent years in providing greater clarity for energy companies, planners, landowners and environmentalists, we believe spatial planning needs to be strengthened at national level to ensure that any further drive towards large-scale commercial onshore wind (and other major projects) does not:

- Damage nature and biodiversity
- Undermine natural solutions to the climate emergency, such as peatland restoration
- Adversely impact on valued local and national landscapes
- Negatively affect local communities
- Compromise the protections afforded in current national planning policy to the 42 Wild Land Areas.

We do not advocate in any area a blanket ban on all renewables. Instead, we would draw a clear differentiation between small-scale, sensitively designed, community-led projects and large-scale commercial developments which fundamentally alter landscapes and ecosystems.

We believe there is now an overwhelming case for developing a spatial land and energy strategy so that, in our drive towards renewables targets and net zero carbon emissions, we ensure due protection of ecosystems and wild landscapes that are of environmental, cultural, social and economic importance to local communities and to the nation.



PHOTOGRAPH: GRAHAM NICOLL

Schiehallion framed by Griffin Wind Farm in Highland Perthshire

**“Scotland’s wild and remote areas have a distinct and special character, which is increasingly rare to find, and require protection.” – NatureScot (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage)**

## 5. Maintain the Scottish Land Fund and double the amount available to £20 million

Community ownership, especially in the Western Isles and parts of the West Highlands, has generally resulted in imaginative and forward thinking. Bringing together people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and priorities tends to generate a broader and more rounded approach to land management and delivering public benefits.

As an organisation which works in partnership with a number of community landowners, the John Muir Trust believes that expansion of this model in rural Scotland would not only diversify land ownership and stimulate economic and social progress, but would also lead to more responsible stewardship, with a stronger environmental and conservation dimension.

While the Scottish Land Fund has been hugely beneficial, the £10 million annual budget should now be increased to reflect both the upsurge in interest in community ownership of land and other assets in rural and urban Scotland since that figure was set in 2016, and the growing evidence that community landownership punches above its weight in delivering public benefits. Consideration should also be given to:

- Opening up the Scottish Loan Scheme (currently only available to established businesses) to bona fide community land trusts for the specific purpose of purchasing land and assets
- Authorising the Scottish Land Commission to explore potential new partnership models of land governance that would make it easier for communities to raise the necessary funds to purchase land.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Olympic medalist Chris Brasher celebrates the Knoydart Foundation's successful community buyout in 1999

“Our aim is to achieve a culture shift so that community ownership becomes a routine option for communities, so that it is a planned and proactive approach to community development, rather than reactive, driven by specific problems or land coming onto the market.” – Scottish Land Commission

## 6. Introduce a new Deer Act to replace the 1996 legislation

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In early 2020, after more than two years investigation and deliberation, an independent Deer Working Group published a 374-page report which confirmed that deer management in Scotland is in urgent need of major reform. It set out 99 recommendations which, if implemented in full, would allow us to begin the transformation of thousands of square kilometres of our uplands.

Areas which are now barren wastelands, devoid of trees and wildlife, could become flourishing mosaics of woodland, wetland and pasture, reducing carbon emissions and giving a new lease of life not just to the land but also to hundreds of local economies across our most sparsely populated areas.

Scotland's red deer population has long been an important part of our cultural and natural heritage. But the numbers have almost trebled since the 1960s, from 150,000 to over 400,000. The unsustainably high densities that now persist in many areas of the Highlands come with great ecological, economic and social costs to the country.

For several centuries, deer have had no natural predators – so require human management. That management is currently governed by the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, passed by the House of Commons and subsequently watered down by the House of Lords. After a quarter of a century, it is no longer fit for purpose.

Since then the Scottish Parliament has been established with full powers over land and the environment. It has brought forward important legislation in these areas, including reforming access laws, facilitating community ownership, reducing waste and cutting carbon emissions. But in the area of deer management, we remain stuck in the distant past.

We now have a deeper understanding than ever before of the connections between land management, greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity decline. We also face the challenge of rural depopulation in many areas, which has been aggravated by our failure to diversify the economies of our uplands beyond the traditional Victorian sporting estate model.

The most efficient way to implement the sweeping changes proposed by the independent Deer Working Group would be through a new Deer (Scotland) Act that reflects the needs of the country we live in today.



“The Scottish Government should recognise much more fully the need for changes to the current statutory and non-statutory system for the management of wild deer in Scotland if the Scottish Forestry Strategy 2019-29 is to be implemented successfully.” – Independent Deer Working Group report

## 7. Support a Scottish Environment Act to clean up our air, soils, rivers and seas, and to protect and restore our wild places

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Dozens of Scotland's most active environmental, conservation and outdoor recreation organisations representing hundreds of thousands of individual members have joined forces to call for a new Environment Act to protect, repair, and restore nature and wild places, and to clean up Scotland's air, soils, rivers and seas.

Beyond broad principles, we would like to see the new Environment Act enshrine some specific measures including:

- A ten-year target of increasing Scotland's native woodland cover from 4 per cent to 10 per cent
- A commitment to ensure that half of all new forestry should consist of native species
- A long-term programme to restore, piece by piece, Scotland's natural treeline and missing montane scrub
- Emergency action to protect and expand the remaining fragments of Scotland's Atlantic rainforest, which are threatened by a combination of invasive species, mismanagement and over-grazing
- Increased funding of Scotland's peatland restoration programme with the aim of restoring most of Scotland's 1.5 million hectares of degraded peatlands (3 per cent of the total global area of degraded peatland) by 2030.



PHOTOGRAPH: ALEXANDER M WEIR | FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/WEIRVIEW

Bla Bheinn, Isle of Skye

“Scotland is one of the few countries in the world whose natural capital sets it in a class apart from the rest.” – Dieter Helm, Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Oxford and Chair of the Natural Capital Committee which advises the UK Government



## 8. Maintain the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund at £6m for next five years

Recent years have seen rising numbers of visitors to Scotland's wild and scenic places seeking freedom, tranquillity and adventure. While this has been welcomed by local communities, it has also brought with it some serious challenges.

The longer-term trend came to a head at the end of Scotland's national lockdown in the summer of 2020 when many popular hotspots came under intense pressure of numbers, causing disruption to local communities and harm to sensitive landscapes from damage, litter and fire.

Tourism is a vital and growing part of many rural economies, but we now need the right investment and resources in place alongside a national strategy that aims to spread benefits and impacts more widely. As well as investment in facilities to alleviate local pressures, we would like to see an expansion of ranger services to educate and encourage visitors to respect our wild places and the communities who live there.

The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund has achieved important progress in recent years by enabling new and improved visitor facilities in many areas. We welcome the decision to double the fund from £3m to £6m for the coming financial year and call on the incoming Scottish Government to at least maintain this figure for the next five years.



PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID BALHARRY

The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund helped provide interpretation at Sandwood Bay

**“We are making a plea to ensure that the predicted and sought-after growth in tourism does not overwhelm our smaller rural communities, damaging our natural heritage and ultimately ruining rural Scotland as a sustainable place to live and as an attractive tourist destination.” - Scottish Tourism Action Group coalition statement**

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