

This publication has been put together by local staff and supporters of the John Muir Trust.

As a charity which owns and manages some of Scotland's finest mountain and coastal landscapes, we seek to work in partnership with communities.

We hope to follow this up with a Sandwood Viewpoint later in the year, focusing on the area north of Assynt.



# John Muir Trust works towards creating major hub at Kylesku

## Trust buys 45-acre site near Quinag with outstanding potential to become a vibrant visitor and community enterprise centre

Photo: Sean MacKay



THE JOHN MUIR TRUST has just purchased a 45-acre site on the shoreline of Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin overlooking Quinag with a view to turning part of the property into a major hub for the local community and visitors.

The site currently hosts Kylesku Lodges, a holiday business with ten A-frame lodges.

The Trust wishes to explore a range of options for sensitive development on a suitable part of the site.

These could include a mixed-use community hub to boost the local economy and increase the resident population, alongside a unique visitor experience to connect people with this special landscape.

## Extensive community consultation will launch this year

DAVID BALHARRY, John Muir Trust CEO said:

"Although a small area of land, we believe that with vision and funding, this property has outstanding potential to benefit the wider community across Assynt and beyond. Before we make any changes, however, we want the existing business to carry on operating for the next two years.

"During that time, we intend to hold an extensive community consultation with all local organisations and interested residents with a view to generating ideas and plans that will bring real social, economic, cultural and environmental benefit to the area

"We want to involve all sections of the community in this exciting project."

• The consultation will be launched later this year

# Top theatre duo wants to hear your views on land, people and nature

Photo: Tommy Ga-Ken Wan

OLDER RESIDENTS MAY remember the electrifying drama *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, which toured the Highlands in the 1970s. Others may remember the highly praised remake of the play a few years ago by Dundee Rep, which was directed by award winning theatre director Joe Douglas.

Inspired by the impact the play has had across the decades, the John Muir Trust and Community Land Scotland – the umbrella body for Scotland's community landowners – have co-commissioned Joe Douglas

and acclaimed Highland playwright and author Jenna Watt to write a new play exploring how our land is owned and used in the 21st century.

The aim is to tour village halls and rural venues across the Highlands in 2024.

The project has already received research funding from Creative Scotland and the John Muir Trust, enabling Joe and Jenna to meet communities across Scotland to talk about these themes.

Later this year, they will be visiting Assynt to hear from local people.

"We're delighted to be visiting Assynt, to hear from a wide cross-section of the community. We're still at an early stage in the writing phase, and we're looking forward to hearing a range of opinions about land people and nature in the 2020s."

• Joe Douglas (Director, 2015 remake of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*)

"The piece of theatre we're creating is about asking thought-provoking questions about the future of Scotland's rural land and people."

• Jenna Watt (Playwright, author, actor and Highlander)

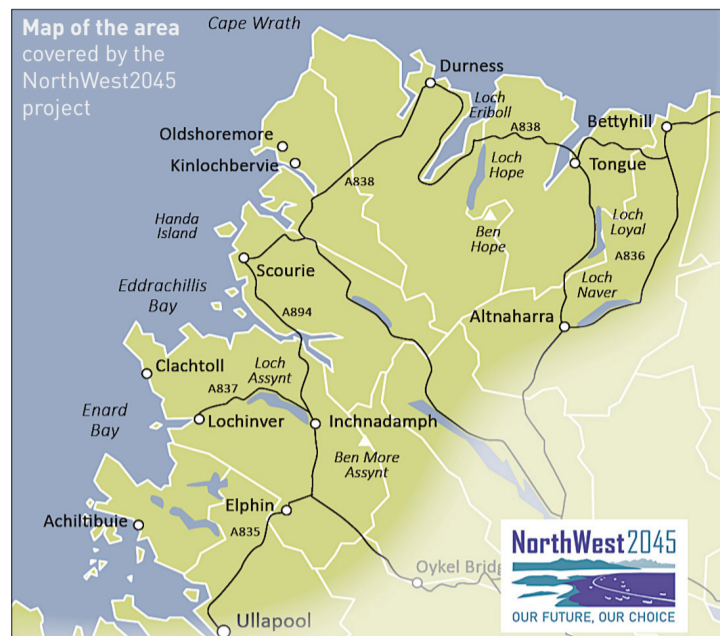
• If you are interested in meeting Joe and Jenna, please text or call 07717 442805 or email [alan.mccombes@johnmuirtrust.org](mailto:alan.mccombes@johnmuirtrust.org)



Dundee Rep, performing *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* directed by Joe Douglas



# Shaping a vibrant future for the north west Highlands



IN 2021, the John Muir Trust helped initiate the NorthWest2045 project, bringing together a diverse group of local organisations to help shape a future where this part of the Highlands can thrive economically, socially, and environmentally.

A steering group representing local communities, development trusts, landowners, and public agencies began an extensive consultation with a broad sweep of individuals across the region, running north from Ullapool up to Durness, and east to Bettyhill.

Based on extensive interviews and online surveys, a vision identifying six key priorities was set out:

- Affordable housing for young people and families
- High speed broadband access for all
- Rural hubs to support businesses, homeworking and delivery of services
- A healthy food scheme based on local produce
- A new Regional Land Use Partnership to support green economic recovery

- New forms of local democracy to give communities more say in decision-making.

Progress is already underway, with funding from the Scottish Government to further these aims.

The area, which has just one full-time resident per square kilometre, has now been designated a Repopulation Zone, and a Repopulation Officer has been appointed to work with communities and landowners to identify sites suitable for multi-unit housing developments.

The 'natural capital' of the region – the potential for land to store carbon and improve biodiversity – is also being assessed with a view to bringing in ethical green investment that will create jobs and contribute to community wealth building.

**Rich Williams** Chair of Coigach Community Development Company and Wild Places Manager (North) for the John Muir Trust

# 'Survival and thrival'

## Chris Goodman: future generations need us all to work together

HELLO AND THANKS to the John Muir Trust for asking me to make a short contribution to this newspaper. I really enjoyed writing a column for Assynt News, so it's a pleasure to have another opportunity to write a few words.

And why am I writing? Because, as I've written before, I want all life on earth to survive and thrive. I don't know how to achieve that, but I do want to be part of that universal conversation.

For me, time in nature – immersive trips into the hills and woods – is my go-to when I find the human world – or my inner world – too painful or difficult.

So I want to say thank you to the Trust for its role in protecting our wild places and trying to restore some of the natural processes which made Earth, Scotland, Assynt habitable for people in the first place. Our land – our hills, moors, rivers, soils, peat bogs, heathlands, grasses – has always helped stabilise our climate and provide habitats for an array of plants, insects, birds and mammals. It provides us with food, shelter and many of the other materials we use in our lives.

Humans are part of nature, and the destruction of the natural world will ultimately lead to our own destruction.

The most stable ecosystems are those with the most diversity. For the sake of future generations, I hope we find ways of working together – crofters, stalkers, foresters, ecologists, farmers, rangers, hillwalkers– to ensure our land will support in perpetuity the myriad of interconnections that underpin all life on Earth.

Chris Goodman (pictured) worked for a number of years as the John Muir Trust path officer, overseeing major footpath restoration projects including at Suilven, Quinag and Sandwood Bay  
Photo: Katrina Martin



Junior Rangers from Ullapool High school enjoy a break at West Edge

## Junior Rangers get their hands dirty as they learn more about seedlings and soils and slithery insects

"WE'D LOVE TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN. I'm inspired to do something more outside."

That was the verdict of one of the Quinag Junior Rangers from Ullapool High School who completed last year's programme.

Now a new group of 12 local students are midway through course to equip them with a range of practical outdoor skills.

The programme aims to equip the students with practical outdoor and environmental skills. In February, Em Magenta of West Edge at Leckmelm hosted a session on the role played by worms in improving the health and productivity of soils. They then re-potted seedlings with compost made at the seaweed festival a few years ago.

Once an uneconomic Sitka spruce plantation, West Edge is now a community of thriving woodland businesses – a construction company, an outdoor children's nursery, eco-cabins, and a productive woodland croft and orchard.





Devoured tree seedlings planted on Quinag by the John Muir Trust, caught by a trail camera

# Let's be clear about deer

## More deer than people

RED DEER are beautiful animals and a beloved icon of the Scottish Highlands. They will always be a vital part of our landscapes because they are native and part of a balanced ecosystem. Over the past 30 years, however, Scotland's deer population has doubled. Because they have no natural predators, we have a responsibility to control their numbers. Here in Assynt, there are now more deer than people. In the past decade alone, their numbers have grown by 40%.

Quinag should be a net carbon sink, helping tackle climate change. Instead it emits an estimated 5000 tonnes of CO<sup>2</sup> per year, more than the carbon footprint of every household in Assynt. The John Muir Trust does not try to dictate our solutions to neighbouring landowners. Instead we focus our efforts on supporting Scottish Government plans to reform deer management nationally, while striving to manage the land we look after – at Quinag, Sandwood and elsewhere – to the highest possible environmental standards.

## Deer welfare

THE JOHN MUIR TRUST is committed to animal welfare. Our stalkers are highly trained and qualified to ensure our culling meets the highest ethical standards.

Animal welfare charities are clear that lower densities would help reduce needless suffering. In harsh winters, many red deer starve to death on bare hillsides.

Lower densities and fewer fences would lead to a stronger and healthier deer population as is the case elsewhere in Europe.

It would also reduce the number of deer injuries caused by 7000 road collisions in Scotland each year (at a cost of £7million).

And reduce the spread of ticks and lime disease among humans.

## Deer and fences

AS AN ALTERNATIVE to culling, some people suggest we build a deer fence. What would we fence? It is not just woodland but all the habitats from the roadside to the mountain tops that suffer from overgrazing.

To protect all of Quinag from deer damage would mean a 50-km steel fence at a cost of around £1 million. This sum could fund five well-paid, full-time jobs for stalkers from now until the end of the decade. Locking out deer from Quinag would mean shifting from one extreme to another – from overgrazing to undergrazing.

To flourish, healthy ecosystems need low level grazing. Excluding deer from Quinag would simply multiply deer damage elsewhere on Assynt and reduce the vegetation available to the animals.

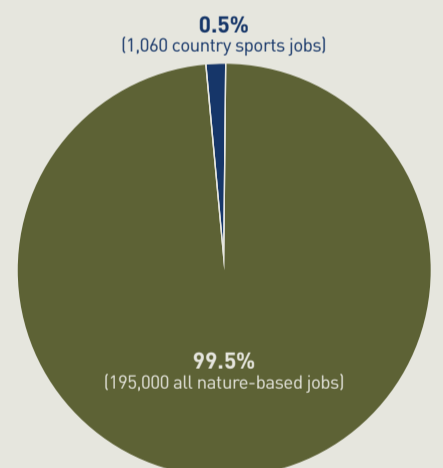
## Deer and jobs

COUNTRY SPORTS – which includes deer stalking, fishing, grouse, pheasant and clay pigeon shooting – supports a total of just 1060 jobs in Scotland. This works out one job per 40 square kilometres across the four million hectares of land owned by private estates.

These jobs are important for fragile rural economies. But to drive repopulation and prosperity in rural Scotland, we need to look to the future. The doubling of deer numbers over the past 50 years has not been matched by rising employment. Nor will reducing deer numbers lead to fewer jobs. Exactly the opposite.

We will need more stalkers to reduce deer densities and maintain them at a level which will allow nature to restore itself. And that in turn will generate an upward spiral of economic activity based on natural solutions to climate change, nature-based tourism, forestry, wood-based businesses, outdoor education and recreation, and livestock grazing on improved soils.

## Country sports jobs as a proportion of all nature-based jobs



\*Data from NatureScot and Scottish Land and Estates reports

## Quinag cull figures

THE JOHN MUIR TRUST has reported a total cull of 203 deer – 159 stags, 29 hinds and 15 calves – on Quinag over the entire year from the start of the stag season on 1 July 2022 to 31 March 2023.

To put that figure in context, over the past 20 years, deer densities in Assynt have risen from less than 6 per sq km to almost 11 per sq km.

At the start of the millennium 80% of Deer Management Group Areas north of the Great Glen had higher deer densities than Assynt. Today that figure is just 40%.

Our cull figures include an out of season license for stag shooting – one of many hundreds authorised across Scotland each year. We also applied for a night shooting license – which was not utilised this season at Quinag.

Not just Quinag but the whole of Assynt will benefit from this reduction in deer numbers – which still leaves many hundreds of stags for those whose priority is sport shooting.



Local MSP Maree Todd opens a new community deer larder funded by the Trust in association with the Assynt Foundation. Also in the photo is the sadly missed Clare Belshaw, and Romany Garnett of the John Muir Trust, who runs a women's stalking group in Assynt. The Trust would like to see wider community participation in deer stalking, through registered local clubs as practised elsewhere in Europe



## Hill to Grill 2023 delivers another sizzling session

OVER TWO unexpectedly calm, sunny days in February, pupils from Ullapool High School took to the hill and the larder as part of the annual Hill to Grill education programme.

Kat Martin, who organised the event on behalf of the John Muir Trust, said:

“Local stalkers took students out on the hill to demonstrate how to track and follow red deer over rough terrain.

“They then showed the pupils some of the techniques involved in butchering carcasses.

“This was a fantastic community effort involving the school, Reay Forest Estate, Highlife Countryside Rangers, North West Highland Geopark, the John Muir Trust, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, the Assynt Foundation, local mountain leader Fiona Saywell and the two stalkers, John Venters and Joe Land.”

Back in the school, the two follow-up sessions focused on cooking and marketing venison.



## Under the radiant hill: a 60 year connection with Quinag

Photo: Robin Noble



1969: Quinag ablaze in the setting sun from Nedd

Author **Robin Noble** is an environmental writer with a lifelong association with Assynt. His new book *Under the Radiant Hill* will be published this autumn by leading Scottish publisher, Birlinn

ONE DAY IN JULY 1959, my family and I, plus dogs, drove our slow way around Quinag; up from Loch Assynt, over Skiag, noting the long slope to Spidean Coinnich, turning on to the even narrower road west, under the soaring buttresses of Sail Garbh and Sail Gorm, before ultimately coming to a halt at the white cottage beside the dark burn that flows from the long western cliffs.

This was Glenlerraig, and I was nine; I had no idea then that I would eventually live here for many years, that it would become my spiritual home, guarded by the long mountain which can be glimpsed from the loft-bedroom.

Even now, in Sussex, a superb, large print of the view from above Loch Nedd dominates my bedroom.

These childhood years in Assynt, and my family’s deep attachment to the countryside meant that my future life would be spent as outdoors as possible, and studying, teaching and writing about the landscapes around me.

I climbed Quinag regularly and constantly took photographs of the mountain. Only some years later, while sorting a number of images from the same location, did I realise that the foreground view had changed: our cottage had disappeared from sight; throughout my teenage years, the woods had been on the move.

This led to long-term study of the native woods of the Northwest and some new insights into their long history, which I explore further in my new book that’s scheduled to be published this autumn.

## Assynt Development Trust scopes out plans for new housing units in Lochinver

FOLLOWING THE resignation of Willie Jack, who has been Chair since the formation of ADT in 2018, we need new directors and members.

If you’re interested, please get in touch.

Under Willie’s lead, ADT has emerged as a major driving force, attracting funding for a number of projects and

supporting other voluntary organisations to gain funding.

Our role has broadened to include other community benefits such as food and heating aid.

But we have not lost sight of our priorities of housing and employment. Activity is underway on the Glebe land (off Canisp Road in Lochinver).

Along with the Communities Housing Trust and Oberlanders (Architects), we are undertaking detailed surveys, costings and design at the site to assess locations for ten affordable units of varying sizes.

If successful, these could be followed by a further 30 units.

ADT is looking to involve interested local people in this project. There will be

opportunities to influence the design and planning of the housing and other facilities.

If interested, check out the ADT website and Facebook pages or contact ADT directly at:

[assyntdevelopmenttrust@gmail.com](mailto:assyntdevelopmenttrust@gmail.com)

**Nigel Goldie** Chair, Assynt Development Trust

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We’d like to hear from you.

If you are interested in a face-to-face or phone conversation about anything in this publication, please email us at: [comms@johnmuirtrust.org](mailto:comms@johnmuirtrust.org)

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