

BORDERS FOREST TRUST: NATIVE WOODLAND RESTORATION IN THE SOUTH OF SCOTLAND

Hugh Chalmers, Site Manager and Wildwood Project Officer
Borders Forest Trust
Monteviot Nurseries, Ancrum, Jedburgh
Scotland TD8 6TU
Tel: + 44 1835 830759
E-mail: hugh@bordersforesttrust.org

Abstract

Borders Forest Trust (BFT), set up in 1996, is a small environmental non-government organisation, working in the south of Scotland. This paper describes the work carried out by BFT, and how this model could be emulated elsewhere in the world. BFT currently has around 700 subscribing members, manages 1500 hectares of land, including over 20 community woodlands.

Projects which the Trust has undertaken including Woodschool, Carrifran Wildwood, Riparian Woodland Network, Ancient Woodland Restoration, School Grounds initiative and Community Woodlands, now have a turnover of around £400,000 sterling, with 16 full-time jobs and over £1.5m sterling brought into the local economy.

Introduction

The Trust was formed when three separate, budding environmental initiatives, based in the Borders Region, came together. The main reason for this collaboration was to assemble a bid for funding to the Millennium Forest For Scotland Trust (MFST). The MFST was part of the Millennium Commission, a lottery funded initiative to celebrate the Millennium. The first initiative undertaken focused on 'Community Woodlands' and the first community woodland was established in the Borders at Wooplaw Woods in 1987. Secondly, the 'No Butts' project involved Borders hardwood trees being converted to bespoke furniture by local makers, and thirdly, the 'Wildwood Project', identified an upland valley where the original wildwood would be restored.

The Trust required a vision, in order to focus members and to persuade others to join, as well as convincing other bodies to come on board.

'Our vision for the south of Scotland is a place where a rich network of native woodlands and wild places flourish, cared for by local communities. We work to conserve, restore and manage native woodlands and other natural habitats for the benefit of people and wildlife. We support community woodland, habitat restoration, education and arts projects, and develop woodland based economic activity. Our vision can only be realised with the participation and support of people in the south of Scotland.'

An overview of the Scottish Borders

The Scottish Borders, where most BFT activity currently takes place, covers around 5,000 square kilometres, of which most is drained by the River Tweed catchment. Rainfall varies from 50cm to 200cm per annum over a distance of only 100km, and the ground rises to 840m on Broad Law. Geologically, the west consists of sedimentary rocks, with strips of Old Red Sandstone, and intrusive hills of volcanic dolerite. Badenoch (1994) describes the development and decline of native woodlands in the Borders since the retreat of the ice cap around 13,000 years ago, based on pollen stratigraphy. The evidence illustrates that a pioneer forest of willow, aspen, birch, juniper and pine formed on immature soils and in the following six thousand years, with periods

of a milder and wetter climate, the temperate broadleaved high forest vegetation was formed. Since then, the climate has become more oceanic and cool, with peat formation on the higher, poorly drained areas.

With human invasion during the Neolithic period, the natural forest declined rapidly due to the twin effects of domestic grazing and extirpation of predators. Sheep and goats were the mainstay of the Scottish economy, and with the rise of the Abbeys in the Borders in the 12th Century, i.e. Melrose, Kelso, Jedburgh and Dryburgh, sheep farming and a dynamic trade on wool, became dominant, with little interest in native woodlands. By the 1980s less than 0.06% of Tweeddale - the western, higher part of the Borders- was considered ancient, semi-natural woodland. It is only now, in the 21st Century, that we have been presented with an opportunity to restore native woodlands in the Borders, and to revive a woodland culture.

Borders Forest Trust Projects

BFT aims to restore this woodland culture through education using practical examples of native woodland restoration. Through the Community Woodlands project, people are encouraged and enabled to become responsible for the management of woods located close to them and to plant new multi-purpose woodlands. The riparian woodland projects protect and expand existing woodlands close to the River Tweed and its tributaries. The Ettrick Floodplain Restoration project has restored two square kilometres of floodplain to the dynamic woodland mosaic of a natural floodplain. The Carrifran Valley in Moffatdale, a spectacular ice-moulded glen, covering 660 hectares, is now owned by BFT, and will eventually become a unique natural forest. The Woodschool demonstrates how a neglected resource can be utilised locally, bringing jobs and income to the local economy. All these projects are part of the 'woodland culture' that is currently being revived in the south of Scotland.

BFT's woodland restoration efforts imitate the conditions that prevailed in the original wildwood. There are a number of elements missing from most of our remnant woodland sites (which are largely in remote, steep gulleys, locally known as cleuchs, where sheep, deer and goats cannot browse). These conditions include a lack of seed source, heavy domestic grazing pressure aside the gulleys, and an undisturbed grassy sward. To reduce domestic grazing pressure, fences have been constructed (over 70km to date). The wider strategy aims to create significant ecological linkages along rivers and over watersheds and is a strategy shared by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS). Where native tree seed sources are absent or impoverished - most of our remnant woods consist only of willow, rowan and birch - saplings are grown from locally collected seed, and planted onsite. Soil disturbance - previously carried out by wild swine in the original wildwood - has been mimicked by hand screefing and direct seed sowing, and the role of the wolf in controlling roe deer, hare and rabbit numbers has been undertaken by marksmen with rifles. In other places, plastic tree guards are used to protect trees from browsing.

Access to land for woodland renewal often presents a challenge, particularly where the current land use is heavily subsidised by the European Union Common Agricultural Policy. However, forthcoming changes may make it possible for farmers to work more closely with BFT. At present, farmers are compensated for loss of grazing income if they exclude livestock from land or woodlands, and this, along with the new Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme, is the main mechanism used by BFT to gain management control over farm land, with the aim of restoring native woodlands.

The purchase of the entire Carrifran Valley in 2000, for a sum of £340,000 was an exception. The purchase of this valley resulted from a massive public appeal over a two-year period and over 600 'Founders' came forward with the money to take full control of the land. Following public consultation and a comprehensive environmental statement compiled by volunteers, the work to restore the wildwood was approved and to date over 300,000 native trees have been planted. This achievement gave BFT massive confidence and persuaded various funding bodies, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, that BFT was a credible and responsible body worthy of funding.

Conclusion

BFT now has limited core funding for its wide range of activities from Scottish Natural Heritage (who have always been supportive), Heritage Lottery Fund, and from other Trusts. These go some way to covering the shortfall in funding of land-based grants from FCS. Funding is always a worrisome issue, and BFT is indebted to a core of regular volunteers who sit on steering groups and committees, who plant trees at weekends and who share the desire to work locally to improve the environment.

The activities of BFT demonstrate what dedicated individuals, local communities and volunteers, can achieve using limited resources. Extensive information on BFT projects is available at www.carrifran.org.uk and www.bordersforesttrust.org

References

Badenoch, C. 1994. Woodland Origins and the Loss of Native Woodland in the Tweed Valley. In *Restoring Borders Woodland*. Peebleshire Environmental Concern, Kidston Mill, Peebles, EH45 8PH