

Focus on Lochaber

Background

Lochaber is an area of great natural diversity, covering over 5180 km² in the West Highlands of Scotland. The area is sparsely populated with a population density of 4.3 inhabitants/km².

Forests and woodland cover 83 877 ha (17%) of the total land area in Lochaber. Even though Scotland has a rich woodland heritage and a very active forestry sector, the commercial forestry in Lochaber focuses on production of timber from Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) plantations. This leaves a substantial amount of forest that is not currently being managed; almost a quarter of the mapped woodland (19 210 ha - 149 private owners) has never had a grant or a felling licence, and nor do they have long-term management plans in place.



Birch woodland, Glengarry, Lochaber.

Of the total mapped woodland, 30 797 ha (37% of the forest area) in the Lochaber forest district is owned by or leased to the Forestry Commission (the UK government agency responsible for forestry), and 53 080 ha (63%) is in other ownership. Other owners include: The Highland Council, NGOs (the Royal Society for the

Protection of Birds-RSPB, The National Trust for Scotland, The John Muir Trust, The Scottish Wildlife Trust), Communities, Companies, Private Estate owners, Farmers and Crofters¹. Some of the private owners do not live in the area and many of the owners of larger forests contract private companies to manage their forests.

The management objectives for most of the forest area and forest owners are multi-objective, including timber production, amenity, hunting, and conservation. However, the importance placed on each objective varies between owners and forest areas.

The forests are dispersed across the Lochaber district and access to some areas is difficult, if not impossible. Many areas have no road access, and of those that do, the road quality may be inadequate for extraction (there are many single track roads with weight restrictions). In some cases the only access is by boat (e.g. the Knoydart peninsula, and the islands of Rùm, Eigg, Muck and Canna). Much of the forest area is located on steep slopes, requiring a specialist workforce and equipment, increasing the cost of access and extraction.

Another important issue for owners of small forests, is the accessibility of markets. In most cases markets are distant or inaccessible for small woodland owners. The major timber processors based in the region do not purchase small lots.

SIMWOOD's work in the region

Interviews held with a number of stakeholders provide a snapshot of the state of wood mobilisation at the start of the SIMWOOD project.

- Woodland owned by the Highland Council is not managed for production. However, the local community is allowed to remove windblown trees for use as fuelwood.

¹ Crofting is a form of small-scale land tenure particular to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The average size of crofts is 5 ha, but can range from ~0.5 ha to ~50 ha.

- the RSPB manages its land specifically for conservation and amenity and carries out no harvesting. Rhododendron clearance and bracken cutting takes place, and they have indicated their interest in managing (thinning) the Atlantic oak woodlands to improve the natural regeneration of oak.
- The Morven Community Woodland manage a small area (6 ha) for conservation, amenity and fuelwood production.
- The Knoydart Forest Trust manages 800 ha forest owned by the Trust and another 250 ha for other private owners. Of the 800 ha, only 400 ha are productive forest (the other 400 ha are largely inaccessible). Under the management plan, 6000 tonnes of timber are harvested, and some additional wood (thinnings, windblow, poor quality) is extracted for fuelwood.
- For some estate owners, the main (and sometimes only) objective is to manage the land for deer stalking.

Pilot project: Living Working Woods – The mobilisation of social, environmental and economic assets of undermanaged and underutilised woodlands

It is in this context that a pilot project was implemented to establish collaborative working to increase the effectiveness of owners and managers of small woodland areas. The methods for achieving this included:

- scoping of the pilot project through a focus study;
- desk-based review of existing technical and economic studies of wood mobilisation;
- a desk-based market survey of available markets for products (with focus on fuelwood) that may be mobilised from small woodlands across Lochaber; and
- a series of demonstration events involving a variety of stakeholders.



Demonstration event, Glengarry, Lochaber.

The pilot project demonstrated, in principle, the economic viability of managing small woodlands in Lochaber. Feedback at the events indicated that there is a willingness amongst stakeholders to look at novel approaches, and an acceptance that collaborative working could be an effective way to enable this. Over the course of the pilot project – through the interviews, workshops and other events – a change in attitude towards management was observed. The participants actively engaged in the process to establish what could be done to support them bringing their woodlands into management and delivering more products to markets.

Commercial forestry in Lochaber is managed by the larger forestry companies who often cannot tackle smaller parcels cost-effectively; they do not have appropriate equipment and it takes too long to market small lots. However, there are an increasing number of contractors offering alternatives to the traditional large-scale harvesting and extraction methods. Working with these contractors and woodland owners and managers, and on the principle of economy of scale, the SIMWOOD pilot project examined different models of collaborative working to assess which models have the ‘best fit’ in Lochaber, ensuring that mobilisation is sustainable, economically viable and is practical given available resources (including availability of labour, experience and equipment). This also involved discussion with other regions engaged in SIMWOOD to assess how they resolve similar

issues with respect to small, remote, fragmented areas of undermanaged woodland.

Based on outcomes of discussions within the pilot project, it is proposed that a 'shared forester' approach will be taken to improve economy of scale for harvesting, extraction and marketing, working with appropriate partners to deliver the objectives of the range of woodland owners.

Another outcome of the work within SIMWOOD has been the development of a follow-on project. The project has been designed by the Small Woods team to reflect the input of the consultation carried out through the Pilot Project. In particular, it will look to establish a collaborative working approach to establish a range of pathways to the improved and sustainable utilisation of the currently undermanaged small woodlands across Lochaber and the rest of the UK.

Contacts in the region

The SIMWOOD local team includes

Amanda Calvert, Small Woods Association

Email: amandacalvert@smallwoods.org.uk

