

## **Countryside as Garden**

James Fenton 21 December 2013

As spring comes and the first snowdrops and daffodils appear...

We all know there are some pretty uninspiring housing developments in Scotland: houses of grey harling in a grey climate built with no concession to the landform. As if just dumped unceremoniously on the landscape with, trees, of course, largely lacking. Hopefully we would not build such places nowadays because we understand the importance of good design and green space to the quality of life, at least I hope we do; accountants and politicians might see such additions as unaffordable and unnecessary frills. Maybe it was poverty of the imagination which has led to these houses in the first place, or maybe it was a Presbyterian no-frills mentality; but hopefully the reverse is not true, that the poverty of the environment leads to the poverty of the imagination.

There is, though, general agreement today that the presence of greenery, whether seen out of a hospital window or in the area where we live, is beneficial to our health, mental or physical. To this end, the Central Scotland Forest Trust has been planting trees to improve the environment of the Central Belt since the 1980s and the more recent Central Scotland Green Network has as its vision: "By 2050, Central Scotland has been transformed into a place where the environment adds value to the economy and where people's lives are enriched by its quality." Ironically the Green Belts around our towns and cities, first created under enlightened 1940s and 1950s planning policy, are constantly under threat from developers some of whom see these areas as easy pickings, particularly in the current political climate of 'development at all costs': "If we cannot build this development at the site we have chosen in the Green Belt, we will not build it in Scotland." "We desperately need new housing/schools/hospitals and the Green Belt is the only suitable place." Hypothetical situations?

Green spaces in urban areas certainly brighten up our lives, whether parks, woodlands, wildflower meadows or ponds. They are places to remind ourselves that the natural world does exist out there, and they allow ourselves, to use a clichéd phrase, 'to reconnect with nature': to see the clouds and the sky, to walk on grass, to find shade amongst the trees, to enjoy the flowers, to hear the birds, to watch the ducks on the pond. We feel better for it and these places are essential to modern, civilised living.

But how do these areas relate to the real Scotland? What do they tell us about the wild plants, animals and habitats which are the true nature of Scotland? Are they designed to maximise our pleasure, or to bring back some of the natural environment that was originally destroyed? When you see trees planted in a supermarket car park, a roundabout enlivened by plants, a landscaped garden around the frontage of a new office or a newly planted urban woodland, do they reflect what the original town replaced? Do they help us bond with the native plants of Scotland, remind us of the natural Scotland we are increasingly distant from? I think not. The trees and shrubs planted in landscaping schemes tend to be the same few species whether in Truro or Thurso, Winchester or Wick. Daffodils are planted to liven up the spring, or snowdrops planted along the roadsides. Maples are planted to provide autumn colour, pyracantha and cotoneaster for their berries, conifers for their winter green. None of these are indigenous to Scotland, unless the conifer is Scots pine or our native juniper. The plants may well be sourced in England or Holland.

But does it really matter that we manage these areas in the same way as we would a garden: for our personal enjoyment? I think it does, for if this is most people's day-to-day experience of nature they are gaining the wrong impression of Scotland's own natural world. More importantly, though, it can create the wrong mindset of how we should manage nature further of our towns and cities: it can lead to the mindset that all of Scotland's wild nature should be managed to maximise our pleasure,

should be a glorified 'Scotland in Bloom': that the countryside be managed as a garden. For example in rural villages you can see daffodils being planted along roads distant from any houses.

So what principles are followed in the creation and management of these urban green spaces? And how do they differ to those which should be applied in the wider countryside? Their main aim is to brighten up our towns and cities, to make them attractive places to visit; spring colour, summer flowers, autumn leaves will all be important. A pond would add to the attraction, as would an area of grass for running around on and a wood for walking dogs. Diversity is a key feature: let's maximise the opportunities to see wildlife by providing a wide variety of habitats. Similarly in our gardens if we want to 'do our bit for wildlife' we may well put out food for the birds, place bird-boxes on trees, dig a pond, plant a tree, create a wildflower meadow, choose flowers for butterflies, create habitat piles for hedgehogs... We are aiming to maximise diversity and whether it reflects the nature which was originally present is neither here nor there.

A word that has come into common parlance in recent years is 'biodiversity', short for 'biological diversity'. And nowadays all the talk is of conserving biodiversity. However the inclusion of the term 'diversity' makes most people think that the aim is to maximise the diversity of plant and animals in a given location – the approach taken to producing a wildlife garden as outlined above. And the approach is carried forward into the country with, for example, work undertaken to maximise the numbers of plants and animals in woodland plantations, on farmland or in nature reserves. You may well go to a nature reserve where ponds have been dug for wildfowl, scrapes created for waders, woods planted for woodland species and open areas created for species of open habitats. The full nature experience in one site. It is wildlife gardening but on a bigger scale than most of us can manage at home. And visitors will go away disappointed if they do not see the full array of wildlife. It is the urban view of wildlife taken into the country.

It is probably the approach that of necessity has to be taken to manage the remaining areas of wildlife in lowland Britain, where intensive land use has destroyed all but the small handful of sites where Britain's indigenous vegetation and habitats can still be found. If these islands of nature in a sea of farmland and urban sprawl are not microscopically managed, then many plants or animals will disappear from the lowland landscape completely. However this gardening mentality has been carried north into the mountains and moorlands, the free-ranging landscapes where the situation found in the lowlands is reversed, where farmland and settlements are islands in a sea of extensive hill land. You can hear it from everybody: conservationists and landowners say, for example, that deer must be managed, botanists might want the rare plants made more common and bird watchers the range of rare birds extended, woodland enthusiasts say that woods must be protected from grazing, keepers say that heather must be burnt and vermin shot, fishermen say they want sawbills controlled, animal rights people say that it is cruel to let wild animals die, visitors say they want to see red squirrels... And even the nature reserves here, far distant from the centres of population, may well be managed to maximise the number of plants and animals.

But is this not the same urban mindset of seeing the hills as one big garden with everything maximised for our interest and enjoyment? And nature, of course, cannot do without our helping hand... (How did it manage without us for the first few millennia of the world's existence and how does the rest of the universe manage, one might ask?). However I would not totally disparage this approach: indeed, as I have said before, it is essential in much of lowland Britain. And where humans have caused proven damage some management is always necessary; for example reintroducing animals made extinct by our hand, controlling non-native invasive plants, or filling in ditches in peat bogs.

However, perhaps because nature conservation first arose in intensively managed England where natural habitats are in the minority, the prescriptive mindset to managing nature has become the norm, even in the Scottish uplands where the approach does not really work. To date the trend has to be to create action plans: ecosystems are disaggregated into their component parts and action plans for each created. For example, taking a hypothetical Highland estate, there will be an action plan for birch woodland, for Scots pine woodland, aspen woodland, heather moorland, peat bogs, species-rich grassland, montane willow, capercaillie, black grouse, red grouse, wood ants, deer, red squirrels, butterflies, dragonflies, fungi, rare plants, mosses, lichens... The situation is complicated by each group having its own specialist NGO lobbying for their particular species. But it is often the case that different habitats and species have contradictory habitat requirements. For example, species-rich grassland is maintained by high grazing, and montane willow scrub can tolerate no grazing: how do we manage the area if they occur side by side (as they do in Glencoe, for example)? If pine forest expands it can only expand onto heather moorland: the woodland expansion will put the woodland in favourable condition but the declining moorland in unfavourable condition.

Ecosystems are complex and the approach of reducing them to their component parts, identifying the optimum management for each and then putting it all back together again quickly fails under the weight of its own complexity. In practice, such an approach only works if action is targeted at one or two habitats or species. We cannot fence every individual vegetation type so as to keep each in optimal condition: in any case, nature does not use fences. This prescriptive approach where the different facets of the landscape are compartmentalised in our minds leads to compartmentalisation on the ground: it is this compartmentalisation that I see as the biggest threat to the previously free-ranging Highland landscapes. Interestingly the statutory nature conservation agency Scottish Natural Heritage commissioned a report three years ago which concluded: "It may therefore be hard to devise a management regime that will maintain all the habitats in a favourable condition." Help! How do we reconcile the irreconcilable?

The difficulty of applying this prescriptive, gardening approach to the large scale landscapes of the uplands may be a reason why in recent years a contrary approach has arisen: that of 're-wilding', of letting the landscape be wild, of withdrawing from management, of allowing natural processes to be in charge. I fully support the approach and tend to believe that much of the conservation management undertaken in the Highlands in recent years has been detrimental to its conservation value (excepting, as mentioned above, action to put right human damage such as removing introduced species). If all the effort directed to the Highlands in recent years had been directed to the lowlands, where development pressure is intense, then, in my view, more would have been achieved for conservation. I believe that much of the Highlands has always been 'wild' so we do not need the 're-'. Unfortunately also is the fact that 'rewilding' has become synonymous in many quarters with creating woodland which to me, as discussed in a previous Sunday Herald essay, is the opposite of allowing the area to be wild: it is forcing our mental image on the landscape.

I have mentioned how the term 'biodiversity' has become the dominant one in directing nature conservation activity and how it is easy to be misled by the 'diversity' bit. There is a scale issue here which is not often brought into consideration. At a global level, conserving biodiversity means conserving all the plants and animals which characterise each part of the planet. And here we do want to conserve the maximum biodiversity. In fact we cannot increase biodiversity at this global scale as it has previously been given to us by nature. At the Scottish scale it means conserving all the plants and animals which would naturally be found in Scotland and which give the country its distinctive characteristics at the global level. Again we cannot increase this biodiversity because the suite of species we have inherited from nature is a given. In terms of Scotland's natural habitats, these may be species-rich or species-poor, diverse or undiverse. At a global scale, conserving the full range of the planet's biodiversity means conserving the species-poor areas in addition to the

species-rich. Conserving the species-poor woodlands, moors and bogs of Scotland is as important as conserving the species-rich ones: diversifying them or attempting to increase their species-richness will actually reduce the global biodiversity.

If we want to conserve the full range of plants and animals on this planet, we have to put aside what we as a species personally prefer or we will end up losing its rich panoply of wildlife. At the end of the day, miles of Caithness peatland can seem pretty boring, as can miles of Arctic tundra or Sahara desert. By trying to diversify these areas to make them more interesting to us, we are contributing to the loss of global biodiversity. So no, we should not manage the natural and semi-natural areas of Scotland which are still large-scale: they are not gardens or urban parks there for our pleasure. They represent the last remaining areas of the planet where nature is still in charge, areas we can go to enjoy it (or hate it), to study it, to understand it. If we do not maintain such areas, we will no longer be able to understand how nature operates; we will be left isolated, having to manage everything ourselves and, in the complexity of so doing, we are bound to lose many more of the planet's plants and animals, particularly the obscure and little-noticed ones. This will not mean that we will no longer be able to survive as a species, but just that our descendants will inherit a less rich planet. This is where managing the countryside as garden will eventually lead. Maybe we also should spend more effort in ensuring our urban green spaces reflect the Scottishness of the country in which they are found.

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