

EISG BRACHAIDH REVIVAL PROJECT – A SUMMARY

Background – where we are now

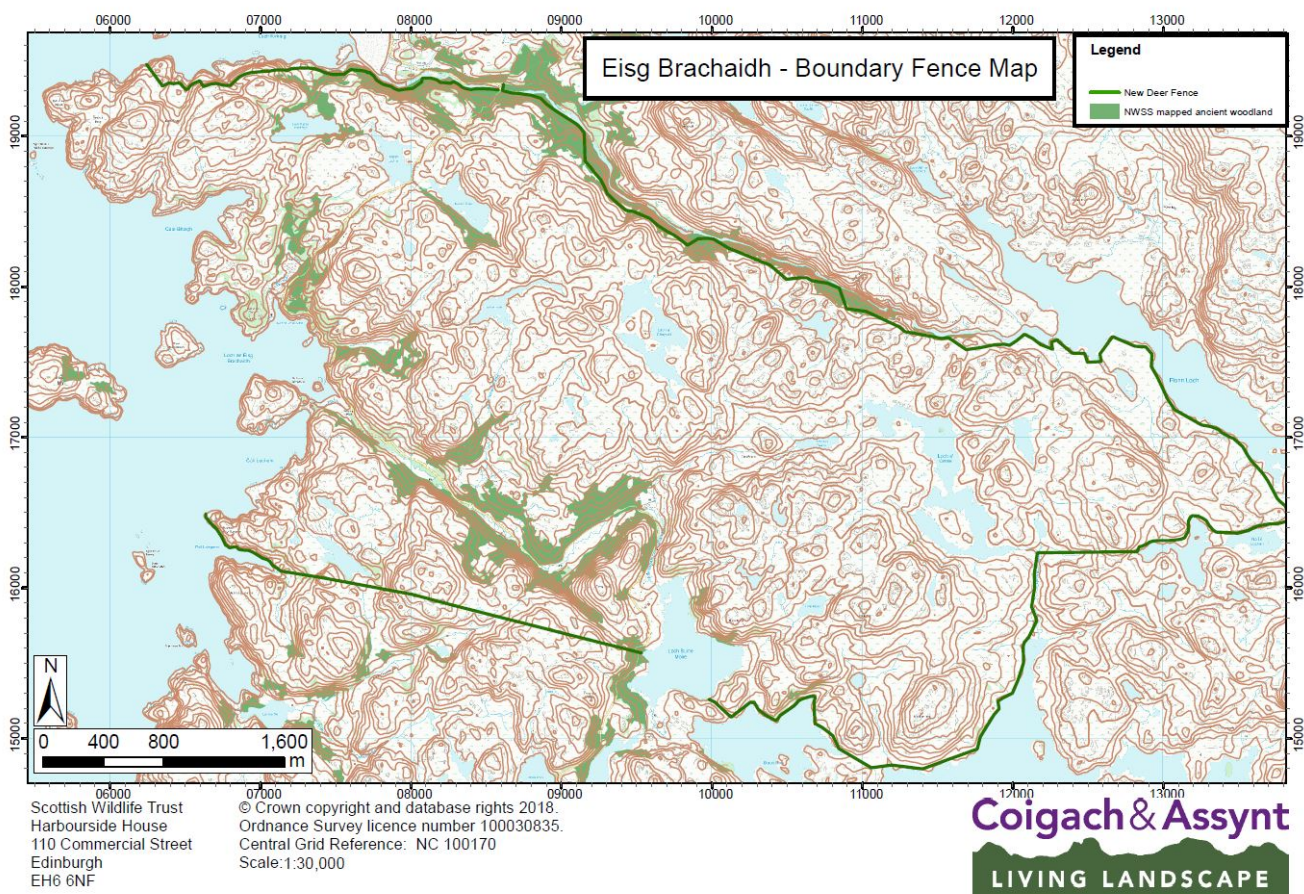
Eisg Brachaidh Estate lies to the south of Inverkirkaig and is 2000ha of heath, Atlantic rainforest and peatlands: all part of the larger Inverpolly Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation. It is a very valuable area for nature but it is fragile.

The SSSI habitats are in a varied condition. Wet Atlantic heaths were assessed as ‘favourable’ by NatureScot before the major fire in 2011 but dry heaths and woodlands are assessed as ‘unfavourable’ and ‘unfavourable declining’ respectively. Woodland habitats (including an important remnant of Scotland’s rare and unique rainforest) have been in decline for centuries, due mostly to fire and grazing. This decline has continued over the last few decades due to old age and overgrazing.

Eisg Brachaidh is in danger of losing many of its smaller woods forever because the new, young trees are unable to replace the veterans. The health of a wood depends on new young trees replacing old ones but this replacement or ‘regeneration’ process has been interrupted for many years because of high levels of grazing from overwintering deer venturing onto the Estate. Overgrazing has depleted all but the most unpalatable tree species as well as a many of the plants and shrubs you would expect to find in a healthy Coigach landscape. The woodland along the roadside where disturbance is frequent doesn’t reflect what is happening away from the roadside where many wooded remnants are reduced to a handful of moribund trees.

Proposal – what we aim to do and when

The work at Eisg Brachaidh aims to reduce grazing pressure and reverse woodland decline before it is too late. To do this it is proposed we erect a deer fence around the boundary of the estate as shown on the map.



The plan is to start fencing in October 2020 and for the fence to remain open in places until March 2021 – this will allow deer to overwinter as usual. The fence will then be completed and deer numbers reduced significantly with a limited number of deer being retained within the fence alongside resident grazing cattle. The impact of grazing and the impact of the fence on deer movements will be monitored regularly to ensure the balance is right to allow the woodland to recover through natural regeneration. Our approach to delivering this project has received support from NatureScot, members of the local Deer Management Sub-Group, neighbouring landowners and Scottish Forestry.

Unightly and derelict roadside deer fencing and old enclosures will be removed at the same time as fencing is installed. The fence will be checked regularly and maintained for a minimum of 15 years.

Public access will be via the public road as it is now, with an additional deer grid being installed on the road by Loch Buine Mhor. Pedestrian gates will be fitted over the winter at strategic access points, as will stock and deer management gates. (Highland Council Access Officers, NatureScot, The Ramblers Scotland and the Scottish Canoe Association have all contributed to this access plan.)

The majority of Eisg Brachaidh will be allowed to regenerate in a completely natural way but small numbers of native trees that are depleted will be planted at scattered locations across the estate (maps provided on request). This 'enrichment planting' will include oak, alder, willow, hazel, aspen, dog rose and honeysuckle provided by Little Assynt Nursery. There will be no large scale or commercial planting. Native planting will begin in early Spring 2021.

There are opportunities for community members to volunteer and get involved in habitat restoration works e.g. monitor herbivore impacts, conduct habitat assessments and plant trees. Training will be provided and Covid permitting we hope to start in Spring 2021, with monitoring extending into the foreseeable future.

If you would like to get directly involved in the conservation management of Eisg Brachaidh do get in touch.

Find out more

We welcome feedback from the community re the plans and invite you to contact Peter Lowe (peterlowe@woodlandtrust.org.uk) or Elaine MacAskill (emacaskill@coigach-assynt.org) before 14 September 2020. Alternatively come and discuss your questions, concerns and ideas with in person at a community 'drop-in' session.

Eisg Brachaidh Community Drop-In Session
Date: Monday 7th September Time: 1pm to 6pm
Location: CALLP gazebo, Culag Park, Lochinver (outside An Cala)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the purpose of the project?

To regenerate and revive 2000ha of Atlantic heath, peatland and ancient woodland (part of Scotland's rare and unique rainforest) across Eisg Brachaidh Estate.

2. Who is managing the work?

It is a partnership under the umbrella of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Project (CALLP) which has been developed between Eisg Brachaidh Estate and Woodland Trust Scotland (WTS). WTS will be overseeing the work under the guidance of NatureScot (for the SSSI and deer management).

3. Who is funding it?

More than £420,000 has been secured thanks to funding support from the NatureScot Biodiversity Challenge Fund, Eisg Brachaidh Estate and Woodland Trust Scotland. Further funding is being sought from the CALL

project supported by National Lottery Heritage Fund. All funds raised will go directly to pay for the restoration work on Eisd Brachaidh, not to the owners of the estate.

4. How will the fence impact deer numbers and movements?

As part of our plans at Eisd Brachaidh, deer numbers will be reduced significantly once the fence is closed in March 2021. There should not be an increase in deer numbers on the outside of the fence prior to this because deer that normally winter on Eisd Brachaidh will be able to enter through strategically placed gaps in the fence. Once the gaps are closed there will be a compensatory cull. We will closely monitor the impact of this element of the project. The monitoring plan includes regularly assessing habitats and tracks, and sharing those findings with neighbouring estates and the Deer Management sub-group. Collaborative working and open dialogue between neighbouring estates and with the community is key and quarterly project updates (including monitoring findings) will be shared with neighbours and the community to facilitate this. If any additional deer management is required outside the fence we will act quickly (though we anticipate that if this is needed it will be very localised.) We invite any Inverkirkaig residents with observations or concerns about deer to please contact Elaine MacAskill directly. This feedback will be passed on to surrounding landowners and the local Deer management sub-group.

5. Is there no alternative to fencing?

Eisd Brachaidh Estate has spent many years exploring other options, including smaller woodland enclosures. These proposals have however failed to be agreed with a key stakeholder. This plan of action is now seen as the only realistic way of protecting this valuable habitat against further loss. The current fencing proposal involves less fencing than a smaller compartment approach and protects all of the designated habitats, making it cheaper and more cost effective. Without a fence, culling deer, at scale, across a much wider landscape would be necessary to reduce the grazing pressure sufficient for ecological recovery.

6. Why this timing, so soon?

Funding is available to undertake this work now and we would like to start in October. If we can close the fence at the end of the winter, any extra deer that overwinter on Eisd Brachaidh can be managed thereby reducing deer welfare issues and the potential impact on Inverkirkaig.

7. Why maintain cattle and deer grazing inside the fence?

Light mixed grazing produces the best results for biodiversity and will support a more natural outcome.

8. Will there be an Ecological Impact Assessment?

Extensive survey and assessment work has already been carried out by the Estate and SNH through this and previous planning processes. This information is currently being assessed by Scottish Forestry.

9. Will there be a formal consultation?

As this is not a Forestry Grant Scheme application, there is no formal consultation process. This proposal has nevertheless been discussed with many stakeholders prior to the Biodiversity Challenge Fund application. We have discussed our engagement approach with SNH and the Scottish Land Commission and although it is a shorter timescale than we'd like due to COVID, staff furlough and grant restrictions, we have been and will continue to, engage actively with stakeholders about this project on an ongoing basis. We recognise deer impacts are of particular interest to the local community and would encourage anyone with feedback both now and as the project develops, to contact Elaine MacAskill (elainemacaskill@woodlandtrust.org.uk).

10. What about deer around Lochinver Village?

We are aware of the existing issue with deer entering Lochinver village. Deer movements are complex and not fully understood, but feedback from local stalkers suggests most are entering from land to the North and East. We have surveyed the existing deer fences around the village - as requested by the Community Council - and believe various existing fences could be linked together with additional new fences to prevent deer access to much of the village. We look forward to discussing this at a future community council meeting and at the Community Drop-In Session on 7 September for those whom that suits. Thank you.