

# When 'green' means ruining our landscape

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The continued desecration of the flow country of Caithness and Sutherland in recent years has been one of the saddest aspects of the far north. Although a wild, harsh landscape it is important for birds and plants and insects, now we know it is probably the largest expanse of blanket bog in the world, rich and diverse and a huge and very important carbon store.



The Flow Country is a landscape of global importance

In the 1980's, vast areas were planted with non-native spruce and pine because landowners and developers could make lots of money from government tax concessions. The large sums spent in building miles of road and planting many square miles of virgin moor would never be recouped by harvesting the slow-growing trees. Belatedly the mistake was recognised and some organisations such as the RSPB have been heroically attempting to remove the forests and restore the original peatlands. It will take a century at least.

But, very unfortunately, some folk reckon that since the peatland is already ruined we may as well compound the disaster by turning the forests into huge wind-farms, even though there is no way of taking the power south if the wind is anything other than gentle. Money is raked in right left and centre at the expense of the tax-payer and bill-payer and the environment is destroyed. It's a funny sort of 'green' that wrecks landscapes in order to make landowners and developers rich!



The Croft House now serves as a bothy

One of the worst examples is the long valley of the River Strathy. Forty years ago, a little track wound its way southward over the moors for a dozen miles, ending at one of the remotest former dwellings in the highlands, the Croft House. Families of shepherds and gamekeepers lived here till the second world war, now it is a bothy. The shortest approach was to walk for several hours across pathless moor from Strath Halladale, passing the old schoolhouse at Dyke then the quiet shores of Loch Nam Breac. There was no more isolated yet peaceful spot.

In the 1980s, planting on a colossal scale surrounded Dyke and the Croft House with huge silent forests and only a relatively narrow strip of moorland remained. To the north, much of the forest has now been turned into the Strathy North wind-farm.

'Strathy Wood' wind-farm is in the planning system and permission has been granted for Strathy South. It will be turbines all the way from the north coast.

Dyke Forest has been felled by the RSPB and at huge effort the brushwood is being removed and chipped and the ground levelled again. How many millions will it have cost to plant the forests then return the landscape back to what it was?

I cycled for miles past Dyke up the forest road from Halladale, left the bike near the old forest fence and sloshed westward across the soaking moors. It was hard to appreciate how dry this area must have been earlier in the year. A huge moorland fire which was started near Melvich had advanced southwards for some ten miles until being brought under control near here. Fortunately the damage to the peat was mostly superficial with lots of new growth of grass and heather, but all the insects and nesting birds of May would have been destroyed and some centuries-old sphagnum mounds have been burnt to nothing.

Forest rides and a secret path took me through to the next forest road, the floor of these huge dark forests thick with red and brown toadstools. Another mile down the sandy track and a splash through the ford led to the peaceful bothy. It is hard to imagine the change that is going to happen here when the wind farm construction starts. I hadn't expected to return after my previous visit over a year ago but for some reason the project had been delayed. Maybe, I hoped, shelved. I made my slow way back to the Strath through the quiet forests and moors in the autumn sunshine.



The track leading to the Croft House