

A productive, working forest

*providing measurable social, economic and environmental benefits
for local residents and visitors alike*

Newsletter – May 2011

Update

It has been over two years since the public meeting in Kilmorack Hall where the campaign to bring Aigas Forest into community ownership was launched. Those present back in March 2009 may remember that there were concerns about the availability of funds for community buy-outs; but it was agreed that if you don't try then you clearly won't succeed. Well those concerns were certainly not unfounded. The days of big contributions from the National Lottery and the Scottish Land Fund are gone, especially where the buy-out is of publicly owned land like Aigas Forest. But with changing finances come changing rules. In 2009 the only option on the table was to purchase the forest, now communities can consider leasing from the Forestry Commission instead. Leases can be for anything between 25 and 125 years - timescales that allow a community considerable scope for activity. And entering a lease does not prevent purchase at any time in the future, if funding changes for the better.

Aigas Community Forest were given until June this year to raise the funds for purchase but we haven't made more than a small dent in the asking price of £690,000. So we've started to look at the leasing option more closely.

There are a lot of issues to consider and it is by no means a simple process but we have now written to the Forestry Commission asking for extra time to investigate leasing. At the moment we have forestry experts working up a business plan that will allow us to estimate financial viability for a leased forest and provide us with the information we need to negotiate a fair rent. This work is funded with grants from LEADER and The Highland Council. If the business plan stacks up and rental looks like a good option then we will consult widely with the community before entering a lease.

As our work to secure the Forest continues we are going ahead with our Annual General Meeting on 20th June. This is the first AGM so all current directors will retire, but all may choose to stand again. We are also looking for new people to join the Board. More about this inside.



Must remember!!

*Community Forest
Annual General Meeting
20th June, 7.30pm*

*Magnus House
Aigas Field Centre*

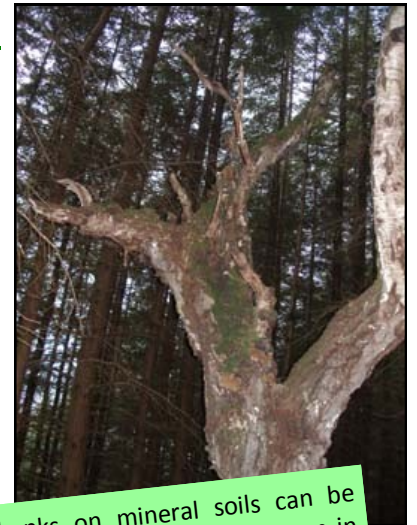
AGM and Election of Board Members

Aigas Community Forest has been established as a Company Limited by Guarantee. As such we have 'Company Members' - community residents who have joined the company and have voting rights, a direct influence over the election of directors and the opportunity to become a director. This is all fully described in our Join Us leaflet and on the Join Us and Governance pages of www.aigasforest.org.uk. The company was formed in February 2010, and so our first Annual General Meeting is due. We have scheduled this for 20th June at 7.30pm in Magnus House at Aigas Field Centre and anyone is welcome to attend, Company Member or not.

This being the first AGM all current directors will retire but may choose to stand for re-election. We are also looking for new directors and anyone who is interested in joining the board should contact Andrew Leaver by e-mail on info@aigasforest.org.uk or by phone on 01463 782597. The closing date for nominations is 5pm on 18th June.

Pledges

Earlier this year we launched a pledge campaign and circulated a leaflet around the community. The aim of the pledge campaign is to get enough people, companies and other organisations from within and outwith the community to promise us a contribution towards purchase. Only if we receive enough promises will we call them in. Even though we are investigating leasing our aim is to own the forest outright and a lease would allow us to complete a purchase at any time in the future. So we are continuing with our campaign and if you want to make a pledge you can do so on our website. At time of publication we have received 12 pledges totalling £3,405. Our vision of 'A forest for the future' presented in the pledge leaflet is reproduced below.



A Forest for the Future

Aigas was once famous for its old growth native pine woods. Many of the finest trees were felled for two world wars after which the land was planted up by the Forestry Commission for a commercial crop principally of Scots Pine with some exotics such as Japanese Larch, and Norway and Sitka spruce. These trees were close planted to encourage rapid growth. As a consequence very little light or energy reaches the forest floor. Much of the forest is dark and impenetrable, and the ground is a sterile mat of acidic needle litter. This prevents anything other than moss and fungus growing, and biodiversity is extremely low. **But it need not be like this.**

First and foremost the community could carefully restructure the pinewoods to allow light and wildlife in. This means sensitively thinning the woods so that the remaining trees can spread sideways; it means creating large and small clearings where native hardwoods such as birch, rowan, aspen and sessile oak can seed and flourish. The last surviving old Caledonian Pines can be given space so that they can seed.

Where there is wet land the conifers can be removed in favour of willows and alders, drains can be dammed and ponds dug for frogs, toads, newts, dragonflies and damselflies. South

facing meadow slopes and banks on mineral soils can be cleared to allow gorse and broom to seed and fix nitrogen in the soil, to encourage wild flowers and provide cover for ground-feeding birds and other wildlife.

There is a small population of red squirrels in the Aigas woods. These need to have habitat carefully created for them, with feeding stations and hazel plantings to keep them healthy while the new-style woods mature. Other wildlife projects could include: a nestbox trail; interpretation boards; a deer hide; artificial badger setts; pine marten boxes; bat boxes; brush piles for nesting wrens; and a couple of osprey platforms near the river.

An extensive network of paths can be cut so that people can access the restructured woods for recreation and the enjoyment of nature. And crucially none of this precludes continued production of some commercial timber and other carefully controlled activities and skills development projects so that the forest can pay its way.

There is a bright future out there and the Aigas woods could be ringing with birdsong and bright with wildflowers once again. In just one generation the woods could be totally transformed. A project for a community to be proud of.

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