

This has been a year to the previous few in that the majority of the large scale building works have been completed and we are now into the next phase of woodland maintenance. The management of a woodland, even one as relatively small as ours is complex and it requires a team of varying skills and abilities to conduct the relevant work to a high standard and most importantly, safely. The weather in this part of the world is infinitely changeable and an understanding of the part the weather can play in our decisions is well understood, enabling us to conduct work in all but the most challenging conditions.

Considerations such as public access and our charitable status must also be taken into account. We have a duty as guardians of Laide Wood to ensure that it can remain accessible to as many people as possible, which we manage to the best of our ability. This has to be tempered by realistic expectations of what our volunteers can achieve.

There has been a dramatic reduction in our income from Government and also due the income from firewood sales having ended. However, the previous few years of firewood sales have left us in the best financial position the Wood has ever been in. At the start of every financial year we take stock of what we need to do and set our priorities, as long as we don't overstretch ourselves we will be able to achieve those aims and the more regular help we get the more we will be able to undertake. Involvement from the community in projects they would like to see completed would add an extra dimension and stimulate interest, which may lead to more taking an active role in management.

During the course of the year, we have once again had to look seriously at the future and what it holds for Laide Wood. Our working party volunteers are at the lowest level since the wood came into community ownership, this is not entirely surprising and is a common trait amongst voluntary based projects especially those which are long term.

Working in a remote community our pool of available help is limited, which is an ongoing issue and has been discussed at public

meetings and in previous reports. The majority of people of working age are doing just that, with little time for volunteering. Our main source of volunteers are the retired and semi retired who wish to remain active. This brings its own issues, as I can testify to, the mind is willing, but the body realises you are not longer young. With this in mind, we have small group of regular volunteers, so it might take a bit longer to get things done, but we have managed well.

We have also a good long term relationship with the National Trust of Scotland at Inverewe.

The majority of the work we do is carrying out routine forestry tasks, but there are always new situations, which challenges our volunteers to provide a solution and gives a real sense of achievement.

Throughout the year, all the routine maintenance has been carried out as usual, albeit at a slower pace than in the past.

In this corner of Wester Ross, there is always the chance of wind damage to the trees and this year has been no exception, although not as widespread as in past years. The philosophy is now a more natural approach to allow the windblown trees to remain windblown, unless they pose a danger to the public and volunteers. So, unless they are overhanging a path we will tend to leave them in situ.

One of our biggest ongoing jobs is the clearing of self seeding non native invasive trees and plants. Thankfully, we seem to have escaped the clutches of the dreaded *Rhododendron ponticum* but we have not been so fortunate with our nemesis *Pinus Contorta*, or Lodgepole Pine, which readily seeds and very quickly spreads. This will be a continuing project, which will take many years to control, but the volunteers are working hard to keep it manageable. We have recently had the children and staff of Bualnaluib Primary School in Aultbea helping us, which is most appreciated and forms part of our ongoing ventures with the school.

We have recently had a LANTRA external examiner qualify two of volunteers as ATV drivers, further expanding our flexibility as our previous ATV qualified personnel were also our chainsaw qualified

people, which limited out options for working. By training more personnel as required, we can adapt our resources as we need and not be restrained by lack of suitable qualified volunteers.

Laide & Aultbea Community Woodland is widely used by local and visitor alike and provides a safe environment for all groups, an oasis of trees surrounded by the open moorland more commonly associated with this part of the world. Whilst our volunteers and membership have changed over the years, some of the members have been there from the start and I would like to think you are proud of the work that has been done over the last 20 years.

Finally, a thought for you to ponder. We have a small regular group carrying out all work required to keep the woodland safe and open to the public. They deal with everything from felling trees, clearing drains to filing paperwork. It is to their credit that the wood functions as it does. When we lose one of our regulars we realise how much we rely on every single one and remember, all of us are not getting any younger. Our oldest volunteer is 86.

So now, whilst the current trustees are still able to fulfil the tasks required, is the time to step back and take stock if LACW is to continue to develop and survive well into the future. Our aim for the last twenty years has been to develop and improve the woodland in the interests of conservation and recreation. We have planted over 60,000 trees and continue to do so, mostly broadleaf, adding to the biodiversity and slowly replacing the non native conifers with native species. We now have a woodland of mixed species of various ages which will be enjoyed by the generations to come and provide this generations legacy to the future. We need more volunteers, either physically working in the wood, or members who will continue to support LACW, which will enable us to continue the hard work of the past 20 years.

Ken Smith
Chair
Laide and Aultbea Community Woodland