

October 2022

Breathing with the trees at Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve



Within Wester Ross, my ranger area, I have some favourite places, one of which is most definitely Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve.

I have a guided walk here in a few weeks and I am checking the route and my memory so that I can give people attending a full picture of this incredible place. For this walk I will be looking at the ecology with a focus on the human history associated with the reserve as part of the Highland Archaeological Festival.

The whole reserve, managed by Nature Scot, reaches to the tops of mountains and down to islands on Loch Maree but the main instigation for its designation as a Nature Reserve in 1951 was its fragments of ancient Caledonian Pine Forest. I feel thankful to the people who sought to protect this place back then.

I remember well the first time I came here in my early twenties during my first job as a ranger. I was in awe then as I still am today. As soon as I am standing within the ancient Caledonian pine forest at Beinn Eighe, I breathe a little differently, deeper. Maybe I have some subconscious physical reaction to being around such old trees, some of which are nearly 400 years old. Scot's pine are the dominant trees but there are also oak and holly, rowan and birch and more.

What have the oldest pines, known as the granny pines, lived through? The remnants of forest have held on through the clearances and collapse of the clan system, potato famines, through two world wars, industrialisation and all the other human trials and developments that could have seen them felled or burned.

The main fragments survived mainly due to their inaccessible location and for the last 75 years have been protected and further expanded. Even in the time that I have been visiting, I have seen this in action. Young trees, vibrant green and new habitats expanding for all manner of wildlife. Beinn Eighe isn't just about the trees, like all healthy ecosystems, it includes a fantastic array of flowering plants, invertebrates, mosses, liverworts, fungi, birds, mammals all sitting on some incredible geology. They are all allowed to flourish because of the protection of the

reserve and decreased grazing pressure. For me though, the trees are the anchor points, the granny pines are the matriarchs, keeping everything together.

Most things come full circle and while I walk the route, reading as I go and try and squeeze all the facts and figures into my head about this very special place, I realise the most important thing I can do is stop in the pine forest and let my walk participants breathe. Perhaps our ancestors did this too when hunting, when gathering while travelling between places. The connection to the human past is within each step and breath and the reserve's importance to our future and the future of the Caledonian pine forest and all it supports, never more apparent.

Jenny Grant, High Life Highland Countryside ranger for Wester Ross