

Rekindling a woodland culture – Recupero della cultura forestale A Leader+ cooperation project between rural communities in Italy and Scotland

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Abstract

In this paper we outline the experiences of a trans-national cooperation project called “Utilizing Woodlands” between project areas in GardaValsabbia (Italy) and the West Highlands (Scotland). Recording and re-animating the vestiges of a traditional woodland culture in each area is a key theme of a project that places strong emphasis on biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest management as key opportunities for rural development. Some of the results of these initiatives are presented in this paper, along with a discussion of some of the challenges and questions arising from our experiences.

1 Introduction

In 2004 a cooperation project called “Utilizing Woodlands” was initiated via the EU Leader+ programme between Local Action Groups in North Italy (LAG GardaValsabbia) and the West Highlands in Scotland (LAG Whelk). The project has been delivered primarily through two main partnership bodies with a strong rural development forestry remit: the Consorzio Forestale della Valvestino (CFV) and the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative(SOI).

Both areas share a number of challenges in terms of relative remoteness from urban centres, steep and difficult terrain which is considered ‘unproductive’ in terms of conventional forestry and agriculture, and a progressive reduction in population over recent decades. Both areas also have a relative abundance of natural woodland and contain significant areas of ecological habitats of European importance (part of the Natura 2000 network). Both areas also have their own distinctive local cultures and languages/dialects, and display a long history of silvicultural management and use of local timber, which is still kept alive (to varying degrees) by a handful of small farmers, craftspeople and woodworkers. In each area work is underway to rekindle the woodland culture, to restore the physical landscape, and to develop a healthy rural economy adapted to the sustainability challenges of the twenty first century.

2 Case study: The Sunart Oakwoods Initiative

2.1 Project scope and location

The Sunart Oakwoods Initiative (SOI) covers the peninsulas of Morvern and Ardnamurchan in a relatively remote area of the west coast of Scotland. The Initiative started in 1996 and has developed into an active partnership between local communities and local agencies (including

Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage, Highland Council, and Lochaber Enterprise). From the beginnings of the project, a key aim has been to maximise the contribution that sustainable management of local woodlands can make to the local economy, by helping to provide jobs directly through forestry and environmental management, and through the enhancement of tourism facilities and the interpretation of natural and cultural heritage. In effect, the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative is trying to create a new model of forestry for Scotland – rekindling a woodland culture, restoring landscapes and ecosystems, and helping to develop a healthy rural economy adapted to the serious sustainability challenges of the twenty-first century.

2.2 Woodland history and traditions of woodland management

The history of woodland cover in the Scottish Highlands has a relatively recent origin (in European terms) beginning with recolonisation of the entire land surface at the end of the last glaciation around 10 000 years ago, with woodland cover reaching a maximum around 4000 years ago. Throughout most of the Highlands the majority of original native woodland cover was lost in pre-historic times, with fragments surviving only in relatively discrete patches and localities, as depicted on maps of the Sunart area produced in the 18th and 19th centuries. These fragments of ancient semi-natural woodland have tended to survive in areas where they were either

- (a) physically protected from the effects of fire and grazing animals (e.g. in refugia such as steep-sided gorge and cliffs) or
- (b) providing valuable resources of timber, fuelwood and wood-pasture for nearby settlements and/or hunting forests for the nobility.

In Sunart the pattern of woodland management appears to have gone through five main phases over the past 300 years (Peterken, G.R. and Worrel, R 2005). Prior to 1750 the traditional uses of woodland were mainly as wood-pasture (mainly for cattle and goats) and coppice woodland - particularly Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), Oak (*Quercus* spp.) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), with only a limited amount of felling in ‘high-forest’ being recorded.

Between 1750 and 1850 there was increased planting of Oak, as well as development of ‘policy woodlands’ (i.e. designed woodlands associated with large estate houses) using exotic tree species; wood-pasture and alder coppice continued to be important, and the management of oak-coppice for tanbark and charcoal became a significant and economically important activity. During this period the traditional social structures of the highlands were severely eroded, and with these changes came the collapse of the traditional subsistence farming system and its replacement by a cash economy and the crofting system. One further consequence of this upheaval was a gradual decline in the management of alder coppice and wood-pasture systems leading to a failure of these woodlands to regenerate.

Between 1850 and 1940 the active management of coppice and wood-pasture systems was more or less abandoned in favour of extensive sheep pasture. Policy woodlands continued to mature and localised patches of Birch regeneration occurred where grazing pressure was temporarily lowered.

The period from 1940 until the 1980’s saw a rapid increase in afforestation with large areas of fast-growing exotic conifer species planted both on open ground and within existing semi-natural woodlands, mainly under the direction of the state forestry service (the Forestry

Commission). Fluctuations in sheep numbers also allowed substantial regeneration of native species in some areas.

Since the 1980's there has been only limited planting of conifers and the harvesting phase has begun. This has provided opportunities for the restoration of the remnants of native woodlands which were underplanted with conifers, and this has been accompanied by several substantial native woodland planting schemes (mainly on private ground). Ongoing grazing by sheep, red deer and some cattle has continued throughout most of the unfenced native woodland remnants.

Following from these 5 phases, the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative is taking woodland management into a new phase that aims to recreate extensive native woodlands for biodiversity and for local use, and to ensure that the policy woods and commercial softwood plantations also make a significant contribution to local rural development.

2.3 Restoring the physical woodland resource

A scientific and industrial paradigm dominated Scottish forestry policy and activity throughout much of the twentieth century. This approach has had a dramatic impact upon large areas of Scotland's current landscape (particularly in the uplands) and has resulted in production figures of around 6 million cubic metres of timber per annum mainly from plantations of exotic conifer species planted since 1945. In the Highlands of northwest Scotland the native woodland resource, already neglected and diminished due to a variety of factors (see above) was to a large extent replaced with the 'new trees'. The condition of the majority of native woodlands that survived did not improve until a change in the paradigm started to take shape at the end of the 20th century. This change is partly a result of improved understanding of ecological processes and partly a re-assertion of local communities' connection with their woodlands and heritage.

Since 1996 the major achievements in terms of restoration of the native woodland resource include the removal of 240 hectares of commercial softwoods, the eradication of 45 hectares of the invasive shrub *Rhododendron ponticum*, the enclosure of 52 hectares of ancient SAC Oak woodland and the erection of a further 24km of deer fencing to facilitate woodland regeneration, and the planting of 18 500 local provenance native tree seedlings. This has been accompanied by a range of scientific studies and monitoring activities, including studies on lower plants and butterflies and a range of surveys, fixed point photos and aerial photos. This period has seen the start of a major landscape-scale restoration programme and a major shift in the dominant paradigm of scientific forestry, with increased government support for restoration ecology, alternatives to clear fell and participatory planning

2.4 Re-connecting people with woodlands

From the beginnings of the project in 1996, a key aim of the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative has been to maximise the contribution that sustainable management of local woodlands can make to the local economy, and at the same time to increase the involvement and contribution of local communities in delivering that sustainable management through partnership working. In an economically fragile area, the opportunity to provide work both through forestry operations and enhanced tourism facilities has been maximised. All forest management has

the potential to support rural development, but in Sunart the importance of the oakwoods in terms of European biodiversity places particular demands but also offers unique opportunities in this respect.

Local skills are needed to support this management, and this has led to the establishment of a sequence of local training initiatives in the area since 1998. The establishment of the ongoing Sgilean Na Coille ('woodland skills') project led from the experience and community involvement developed through two previous skills programmes, which identified ongoing training needs, and a variety of opportunities to increase the value of the woodland resources of the SOI area. The aim of the project has been to positively impact on the Ardnamurchan and Morvern economy by maximising the benefits of the local woodlands, and the capability of the local population to sustainably and innovatively utilise this valuable woodland resource.

These objectives are being achieved by provision of a range of locally-run skills workshops, demonstrations and awareness-raising events focusing on the following themes:

- Woodland management and utilisation (particularly woodfuel and construction timber)
- Non Timber Forest Products
- Health and fitness
- Woodlands, biodiversity and sustainable tourism
- Woodland restoration techniques

The project is match-funded via a £140,000 package from WHELK LEADER+ , Lochaber Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage and Communities Scotland. Project and financial management support is provided by Lochaber College, with overall guidance and supervision provided by line managers from SNH and Lochaber Enterprise as well as the Sgilean na Coille steering group (consisting of members of the local community and representatives from local agencies and funding partners).

Since November 2004, Sgilean Na Coille has provided:

- 31 Training Courses
- 7 evening Talks
- 4 conference support / 'go see visits'
- financial support for 2 wood-working/furniture-making training courses
- 5 School placements
- 4 exchange visits between community members in Sunart and Garda ValSabbia, Italy.

There have been approximately 230 participants in the events provided to date. A programme of further events, including a joint final event with Garda ValSabbia is being finalised before the end of the project in October 2006.

This process of partnership working has identified an ongoing need to support land based skills development in order to achieve the aims of the wider SOI Action Plan and take forward specific community projects and aspirations. There has also been a general consensus that to maximise the value of the training provided efforts must be made to support local people to become trainers in the land-based skills they have developed. The trans-national project has also facilitated some very productive exchanges of interdisciplinary experience among craftspeople, artists, musicians, environmental educational specialists, forestry contractors and technicians, and has helped to stimulate an integration between traditional crafts and new product development.

Increasingly amongst the resultant skilled local workforce, the emphasis is shifting from simply providing labour, to using timber to support other business activities recognising that in a remote area with high transport costs, the best economic opportunities lie in using and adding value to timber locally. Current use of local timber includes woodfuel, boatbuilding, fencing, house construction and craft work.

Furthermore in an area of remarkable natural beauty, distinguished by a wealth of marine and terrestrial wildlife and biodiversity, tourism has long been an important sector of the local economy. Through improvements to woodland access and amenity and the development of new facilities, the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative is increasingly supporting the development of a local 'green' tourist industry.

The main achievements to date, in terms of eco-tourism and interpretation, include the construction of 10km of new footpaths (including provision for 'all abilities' access), the creation or upgrading of nine car parks to improve woodland access for visitors, the construction of the Garbh Eilean all-abilities wildlife hide, the establishment of four small tree-nurseries at local primary schools, the installation of a range of bi-lingual interpretation boards (in English with Gaelic 'echoes'), and the creation of a Gaelic alphabet trail and outdoor teaching facility (the Sgoil na Coille). Other outputs include the production of an environmental education resource pack for children, the production of a guide to cycling and mountain biking routes in the area and the creation and maintenance of the well-used SOI website.

3 Case Study: Valvestino, Garda ValSabbia

3.1 Project scope and location

During recent decades, the Lombardy Region (North West Italy) has promoted and supported the creation of forestry consortiums based upon partnership between public and private woodlands owners. These forestry consortiums are legally recognised bodies and they play an active role in the management of publicly owned woodlands. In this context, in December 2000, the Consorzio Forestale della Valvestino (CFV) was set up as an association between private woodland owners, local agencies and woodland sector entrepreneurs, in order to develop solutions to local woodland management needs in one of the most socio-economically challenged areas of the region.

3.2 Woodland history and traditions of woodland management

"I lontani pendii delle montagne fumavano preparando carbone, e nello squallore delle valli disboscate era un andare e venire di gente nera e di mule cariche per i pesanti trasporti¹"
This is the image that A. Cozzaglio (1914) give us about the upper Garda mountain landscape during the period of the Republic of Venice (in the 15th century).

¹ 'The distant mountain slopes were clad in smoke from charcoal manufacture, and down in the squalor of the deforested valleys blackened people were going back and forth along with mules weighed down with heavy loads'

At that time the woodlands were intensely managed to produce fuel for iron production in the local factories. At the beginning of the 20th century the production of iron collapsed and the intensive use of the woodlands to produce charcoal start progressively to decrease.

Another peculiarity of the woodland history of the upper Garda and Valle Sabbia are the laws concerning the common use of the natural resources (wood, grass, leaves, etc.). In the 18th century the privatisation of the common rights to use forests was going on all over Europe. In the year 1824 the Austrian government forced the mountain municipalities to sell their woodlands considering that only a private property could guarantee a rational use of the resources (A. Bianchi, G. Segala, 1913). The resistance of the local communities to the alienation of their right to use the woodlands was therefore considerable for all the 19th century.

At the beginning of the 20th century some of the local forests were confiscated by the Italian State since the local communities didn't pay their taxes. During this period the mountains were intensely used so that at the beginning of 1900 a local association called '*pro montibus*' was founded. The aim of this group of people was to support a cooperative approach to rural development based on the reforestation of the mountains.

During the fascist era the plantation of new forests, mainly coniferous, was carried out on a large scale, especially in the Northern part of the coast of Lake Garda. The only place that in the different centuries was able to produce either charcoal or commercial timber was Valvestino. At the end of the 19th century Valvestino was producing around 250 tons per year (ERSAF, 1996). After the second World War the use of woodland drastically reduced and most of the people left the mountain to go to live elsewhere. In 1974 the forest property of the Italian State was handed over to the Lombardy Region. Covering an area of 13.000 hectares this is now the largest forest belonging to the Region.

The area now has now a very high percentage of forests cover and a very high biodiversity value, with a wide range of different environments: from the Mediterranean ecosystems of the coasts to the sub alpine vegetation of the upper mountains. In the last decades the use of the forests has not been very intense, and most of the silvicultural activities have been carried out to fulfil conservation objectives. At the same time the traditional knowledge and traditional woodland management techniques has been rapidly disappearing and only few individuals are still continuing to work in traditional way.

3.3 Restoring the physical woodland resource

Starting from the 1950's the upper Garda and the Valle Sabbia area have seen a spontaneous restoration of native forests by natural regeneration. This has mainly been a consequence of the depopulation of the area, the reduction in pastoral grazing systems and the decrease of economical interest in the timber products of the local woodlands. The recolonisation of grassland by trees and shrubs has been the main process of concern to conservationists interested in the upper Garda and Valle Sabbia mountains.

The area has several main types of woodland cover:

- mesophilous broadleaved woodland - largely managed as coppice with predominance of Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*),

- Semi-mesophilous to slightly thermophilous broadleaved woodland (largely managed as coppice, referable to the Orno-Ostryon, with *Ostrya carpinifolia* as predominant species);
- Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) woodland
- Mountain woods dominated by Fir (*Abies* spp.)
- Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) woods (grow in small areas, especially near cultivated zones)
- Sparse Mugho pinewoods (at the upper limits of the forest, sub-alpine shrub vegetation is mainly characterized by *Pinus mugo*)

The maintenance of the biodiversity of the area and the natural restoration of the forests have been the keys elements of two LIFE projects focused upon the Natura 2000 sites in Valvestino.

The goals of these projects were:

- enhancing the ecological integrity of the forest, including the composition, structure, and function;
- increasing ecosystem resilience to disturbance events, including fire, drought, insect infestation, and climate change;
- restoring the natural distribution of tree ages, sizes, and spatial structures.
- encouraging the development of a diverse understory community of plants.
- enhancing habitat for imperiled and sensitive species.
- decreasing excessive tree competition to protect and invigorate old growth trees and encourage the development of old growth structure.

In conclusion it is possible to say that in the last decades the woodlands have been expanded so much that today to maintain the biodiversity of the area, it has become necessary to contain the woodland colonisation of the remaining limited patches of open spaces (which are themselves species-rich grasslands maintained by traditional grazing regimes).

3.4 Re-connecting people with woodlands

The project has been funded by the LAG Gardavalsabbia together with the Alto Garda Natural Park, the Regional Forest Agency (ERSAF Lombardia) and the Province of Brescia decided (for a total amount of 200.000 euros). The realisation of the project has been mainly organised by the Consorzio Forestale della Valvestino as a partnership between members of the local community and representatives from local agencies and funding partners (see below) and it has proved to be an excellent opportunity to open a discussion between private and public partners about the utilisation of woodland in the area of upper Garda and Valle Sabbia.

The composition of the Consorzio partnership between public and private members is described in Table 1:

Private land owners	73
Municipality	5
Mountain community	1
Natural Park	1
Local enterprises	8
Charity	2

Table1: The Consorzio Forestale della Valvestino partnership

The decision to manage the project directly from one of the most fragile and socio-economically challenged areas has been one of the main challenges for the project itself. In this way it has been possible to encourage the local community to have an exchange of experience within the area and together with the Scottish partners, around a subject that was never before considered to be of great importance. At the same time this has been the first experience of a transnational cooperation project for most of the partners involved. Such experience ties in well with the original aim of the Consorzio Forestale of Valvestino - a candidate itself to become a Local Development Agency of the Upper Garda Mountain area. In fact the original idea to create communication, interest, activities, job opportunities and economical development based on woodland, as the main resource of the area, has found in this project a very successful vehicle for further development.

The project has been organised in terms of three different groups of 'actions': preliminary, material and animation actions:

- The preliminary actions have been to investigate the traditional knowledge linked with the use of local woodland within the Leader+ area. In this way some older people still using ancient and traditional techniques have been involved in the project. Another preliminary action has been the creation of a local network between people working in the field of woodland management and wood utilization.
- After this with the material actions the EU funds have been used to create a workshop and multimedia centre for training at the Consorzio offices in Valvestino. At the same time a saw mill equipment has been purchased and a local cooperative has been created to manage it.
- After the completion of the project infrastructure an animation programme has been initiated including seminars, workshops and international cultural exchanges. This has included a project done with the local school called 'from the tree to Pinocchio' an important exchange of experience and knowledge between old people and children of the nursery. At the same time local and international workshops have been carried out on woodland management and utilisation, art and woodlands, charcoal production, traditional thatching techniques, saw-milling expertise and wood turning.

This project has created the opportunity to give to the fragile and relatively remote mountain communities of the GardaValsabbia Leader+ area the confidence to work in cooperation with other communities of different countries, and has provided their first opportunity to use EU funds for rural development. At the same time the comparison between different ways of managing the project and the use of a participative approach has been an important value for both of the local communities.

4 Conclusions

The opportunity for the local communities living in two economically disadvantage areas in Scotland and northern Italy to cooperate in a Leader+ project on wood utilisation has been positively tested. Both the communities seem to be proud of their knowledge and interested to discover their values and traditional knowledge to compare with the experience of their European partners.

At a local level the main results of the project have been the improved connections with local people with disappearing/unknown skills, and the fostering of a more outward-looking perspective. The transnational collaboration has also developed a kind of solidarity in looking

for continuous and ongoing opportunities for engagement and collaboration, links with other projects (e.g. rural tourism) and looking for markets for 'added-value' of woodland products. However, our experiences of this project also leave most of the people involved in the project, especially the younger ones, with a final question: are we recovering traditional knowledge and are we "creating" or 're-creating' a woodland culture? Traditional forest knowledge and culture can and should be recorded and preserved. However, at the end of the day, it is not a static artefact, but the dynamic and cumulative product of a community that is directly involved in the management and ownership/stewardship of forested lands. The daily work of foresters, craftspeople, firewood users, crofters and small-holders in combination with the arts, music and spoken language of the area is what is rekindling and maintaining a 'woodland culture'. This (if anything) will be what policy-makers and academics a century from now refer to as 'traditional forest knowledge' when they meet to discuss the topic!

5 Bibliography

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