

> Alladale, in the Scottish Highlands
Kate Thick



Why we are failing nature

THAT pretty much nails it on the head, I thought, putting down Conservation Politics.

The book's author, David Johns from Portland State University, was also a guest at Alladale Wilderness Reserve in northern Scotland. Alladale is owned by Paul Lister who, fondly described by a friend, is as "bright as a button, with the attention span of a gnat, a hide thicker than a rhino, topping it all off with delightful humour." He is also hugely generous.

At the western end of Alladale's 23,000 acres, a remnant of ancient Caledonian forest survives. Alladale's flora included Scots pine, oak, aspen, alder, ash, birch, rowan, holly, willow and juniper but most of the tree cover had long since gone.

The hillsides of Alladale are now coming back to life; Paul has planted 800,000 saplings which are thriving thanks to careful management. There is little to see here of the usual barren glens; this place is vibrant and will increasingly be so if Paul – a man I wouldn't describe as patient – gets his way.

Slowly, far too slowly for Paul, people are accepting the idea of reintroducing locally extinct species. Rewilding increases the diversity of other flora and fauna, enables woodland to expand which captures carbon, provides educational and work opportunities, and helps people reconnect with nature. Restoring woodland is the crucial first

step.

We have a lot to learn from other reintroduction projects and I was lucky enough to hear a presentation at Alladale by The European Nature Trust (TENT), a charitable organisation founded by Paul focusing on the protection of threatened wilderness areas. Less than 4% of Europe's wilderness remains. Romania has the largest swathes of old forest in Europe, extending for hundreds of miles and home to bears, wolves, and lynx. Alladale and TENT see public engagement and education as pivotal.

Paul's form of land management is counter to the way much of Scotland has been managed for decades; half the rural land is owned by only 432 people, few of whom are Scottish. Some owners have a positive impact, increasing the vibrancy of communities and investing in the local economy, or selling land to increase the diversity of ownership. But most landowners cater for affluent hunting and fishing parties in ways which damage the environment by focusing on deer stalking and grouse shooting.

A recent report found that both cattle ranching and soy industries in

Brazil, which together account for 80% of Amazon deforestation, are financed through European and North American banks and investors, companies that have a long history of backing industries that destroy forests and commit human rights violations.

For decades, the biggest barrier to winning climate and conservation legislation has been a vast power mismatch; 70% of pollution comes from the building, electric power and oil industries – industries unaccountable to you and me. Now, literally, our house is burning down, or being washed or blown away.

Why, when the majority of people say they value nature, are the protection of biodiversity and measures to curb climate change failing? David Johns argues it is because of the human imposition of a colonial relationship on the non-human world – one of exploitation and domination. This domination dynamic creates much human suffering and inequality, and defines the modern world's destructive relationship to the living world. We have taken control of everything but ourselves.

Planting a trillion trees and rewil-

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ding large areas of the planet aren't enough. How do you sustain human societies that are socially just and compatible with a thriving ecosystem? How can we hope that 7bn people in more than 190 counties, rich and poor, with differing political and religious beliefs, might begin to act in ways for the long-term good of everyone?

David provides models of how activists and conservationists can make an impact on decision-making through practical steps. He draws on political lessons from successful social movements, emphasising the centrality of culture in mobilising support.

Important challenges cannot wait until everyone gets on board. Social will is crucial but must be transformed, often through the perseverance of a few, into political will. Take slavery – it took a few visionar-

ies for people to see that subjugation is wrong. The climate crisis is largely an issue of deliberate and negligent corporate greed ... and is wrong.

Grand visions are useless unless brought to ground and given specifics of scale, place, purpose and scientific evidence. Successful collective activism and change require strategy, coalition building and legal structures that encourage local support.

Political change usually involves slow compromise, and that's in a working system, not a dysfunctional gridlock such as we have now. But political leaders are not the only powerful actors on the planet; those who hold most of the money also have enormous power which could be exercised quickly. Perhaps the key to reversing the flow of carbon into the atmosphere lies in disrupting the flow of money to coal, oil and gas? Four-fifths of the world's population live in nations that currently pay to import fossil fuels; ample financing would enable them to transition within a few years to low-cost solar and wind power.

Paul wants to encourage others to use wealth positively. Alladale was once nicknamed Jurassic Park; neighbours and landowners are now looking at the potential of following suit. Paul said: "I'm lucky enough to afford a foundation. I'm merely a custodian of this place with a responsibility to leave it in a better state than when I acquired it."