

## **CULAG COMMUNITY WOODLAND TRUST** **CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT 2010**

Three themes permeate the past year's activities of the Trust and its subsidiary, Culag Enterprises Ltd.

The first theme is Progress and fortunately there is much to report.

Partnership is the second; it is now fundamental to the Trust's policies and programmes. It would be satisfying if the third theme could be simply expressed as another 'P'; Promise. However, that would be too premature a description of some of the Trust's aspirations.

The Trust's progress is, as described in previous Reports, dependent on many people within and beyond our community. This year, so many people have made important contributions that I can only express our gratitude to them all rather than attempt to identify them individually.

We have had two changes in the administration of the Trust. Sharon Bartram, who made a major contribution in establishing our training programmes, left to concentrate on business interests. Happily, amidst the richness of our community, there were several replacement candidates well qualified to fill the role of Officer. Fiona Saywell has joined the Trust and has quickly become a key member of the team. Sharon had demonstrated fine journalistic skills in the Trust's Quarterly Newsletters and has kindly offered to continue in this role. The Trust is grateful to Mark Lazzeri who, along with his substantial commitments at the Foundation, has agreed to become the Trust's Deer Manager and has already been a source of valuable advice.

There has been another very busy year of community, school and visitor programmes at Little Assynt and Culag Woods, for which the Trust is heavily dependent on volunteers and partners, including the Highland Ranger Service and Assynt Field Club. Volunteers are vital to several of the Trust's other activities, notably the maintenance programme in Culag Woods.

The most obvious development during the year has been at Little Assynt, where the new 4.5km 'Loop Path' (we know we need a better name!) is nearing completion. It enables access to some of the most beautiful scenery in the North Highlands and to important examples of Assynt's built heritage. Historic Assynt have completed an extensive survey of the old sheilings and townships, uncovering several previously unmapped sites.

The path is one of the achievements of Culag Enterprises (CE) and its team of young local people. The team members have each taken and passed SVQ training while working on the path. The benefits of the programme are immediately apparent as two team members have found valuable employment and CE has found new recruits.

Culag Enterprises is presently seeking a Rural Skills Business Development Manager to help maintain its momentum and ensure long term sustainability. It is also moving towards Social Enterprise status to facilitate transparency in its contributions to the community.

Complementing its employment programme with training is a central CE principle and the shortage of accredited rural skills training resources in the Highlands is an ongoing issue. The Trust is working with Assynt Leisure to establish an Assynt-based SVQ capability. In addition to providing training for local residents, the objective will be to build the capacity to draw in trainees from elsewhere so that Assynt becomes a centre of rural skills training.

This is one of several projects which we hope will reach fruition in the coming year as recompense for a huge amount of work by the Trust, CE, their partners and members of

the community in the past year. Some of these projects are certain and committed, others are dependent on external decisions which we can influence but not control.

Some committed projects at Little Assynt are already underway or about to commence: CCWT has excellent co-operation with Assynt Angling and as part of the Trust's support for angling the CE team are making improvements to the fisherman's car park and the path which leads from it. The Trust has also provided a boat on the 'Grilse Loch'. With support from Sutherland Biodiversity Group and other sponsors, CCWT is undertaking a study of the aquatic habitats at Little Assynt (and some on Quinag) in partnership with Assynt Field Club and West Sutherland Fisheries Trust. This study incorporates a training programme and community participation. One outcome will be guidance for the future management of the estate. In a complementary project, Assynt Field Club will support David Price of Stirling University to set up caddisfly monitoring at Little Assynt following the recording there of a species of caddisfly previously thought to be extinct.

In conjunction with Historic Assynt, the CE team have made preparations to build a shelter and compost toilet on the Loop path at Loch an t'Sabhail. The shelter will also serve as an interpretation centre using traditional building techniques as they may have been employed on the heritage buildings at Little Assynt.

During the last year, the Trust has prepared extensive and detailed Forest Plans for Little Assynt and Culag Woods, based on consultation with the community, neighbouring estates and relevant organisations.

Proposals based on these plans are now being considered by the Forestry Commission and the Scottish Rural Development Programme. Success of these proposals would have major significance for the future of the two woodlands, the benefits which they bring to the community and for CE's training and employment.

Two years ago, CCWT initiated a partnership programme between several Assynt organisations. This has flourished and has resulted in Assynt Landscape Partnership, a proposal for projects which will benefit Assynt's culture and natural and built heritage, in addition to providing further employment and training opportunities. A response to this proposal is imminent.

The Trust is also involved in discussions with Assynt Foundation, Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and other partners about a potential long term ecological project covering much of Assynt and Coigach based on SWT's Living Landscape concept. Extensive consultation will be required before this can be moved forward.

Whatever the outcome of these various proposals, the Trust will maintain focus on serving the community and caring for Little Assynt and Culag Woods. I want to express my gratitude to the Officers and Board Members of the Trust and CE and to our Treasurer, Ian MacKenzie, for the continuing dedication they show in these endeavours.