

Community and Rainforest Engagement Week (CREW)

*

15-21 April, 2023 . Glenuig



A Trees for Hope Report

April 2023

By Pupak Haghighi



Community and Rainforest Engagement Week

Our guests arrived on time for us to start our nascent week on the 15th of April at 2 pm. Our intention had been to start the programme by paying homage to the oak woodland as a body of the larger Rainforest in Moidart. Mumta, Taka, and their daughter Aayana joined our attunement to the spirit of the forest, by becoming still in their chosen sit spot. We all participated in the exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to initiate our personal contact and relationship with the forest.

I asked our guests to draw what they experienced on paper, using colouring material. We then shared our experiences and insights. This is what Mumta, a lawyer for Nature's Rights received :

Mumta : What can I do to help?

Spirit of the Forest : The forest needs its rights - can't you see me choking to death. What's the use in asking? You know what you have to do but you don't take action. What's the point?

Mumta : But you don't know the trauma that I've been battling with the last few years...

Spirit of the Forest : trauma! Now you know how I feel - now you know what it feels like to try to grow something only for it to be squashed down by trauma each time!!

Mumta : Ok but how can I move forward?

Spirit of the Forest : Shine your light and let it blaze so brightly that it burns through the trauma. Look at the holly, look at the Rowan - even though they're eaten by deer they don't give up. We never give up we keep taking action - - and then the help comes.... You can't wait until the trauma is over before taking action - by taking action and doing what you know you have to do you heal - all of the trauma unravels in the process of taking action.

Each guest received a piece of communication and wisdom by connecting to the forest. We then moved to action. Starting from the land facing the church, on the bank of the road leading to the Hall, we started to remove the rhododendrons. In a couple of hours of working together as a group, we got a good handle on how to tackle the root ball using sharp spade, mattock and saw. We cleared most of the land before retiring for evening meal.



Adam joined us in time for dinner, and the evening programme which was meeting those in the community who wanted to connect with us. We all marched down to the Hall before 8 pm. Mumta and I had created a beautiful nature tray with pieces from the forest and the sea. We gathered wood bark, lichens, old tree-leaves, ferns, shells, and even some rhododendron leaves for the centre-piece for our important meeting in the evening.



Ralph had come all the way from Sheilfoot and brought his own invented device to remove rhododendrons. He left this plus some other very helpful tools such as a pinch-bar, bow-saw, planks of wood to leverage the bar under the roots for our practical work in the next days. Eoghan joined us too to open the door and give me the keys. A circle was made with our guests and some people from Glenuig, and further afield. A fire of connection was lit on our first evening for the rainforests, for the communities in Moidart, and for Trees for Hope, and our future participants from the Fertile Crescent.

A gentle soft rain greeted us on the morning of April 16th. We attuned on the steep rocks facing Viking Cottage. While there, we removed a couple of rhodie plants. When I heard everyone around our circle, I knew what we should do that morning. We went back to the cottage and Alan shared his Atlantic Rainforest presentation with our guests. Aayana being thirteen and home-schooled especially was very ready to receive what Alan had to share.

Adam went on a vision quest to connect with the spirit of the place. He found the stone shielings nearby. He told us later, that he sat there, watching the soft rain come down in diagonal down-pour. He felt the history of the place, the ancestors and the land itself. He felt himself on the land, in the stone-building, in the rain. He prepared his heart for our work, with the forest, for the rainforests of Moidart.

By mid-morning, the gentle rain had stopped. We were ready to engage with our practical work.

We tackled the rhodies to the east of the church. Unlike the rhodies to the east of the Hall, where we could remove the root-ball, we decided to concentrate our energy on just cutting down the trunk and branches. We left most of the root-balls in the ground. I am aware that not removing the roots, is just a temporary measure. We need to return to this part, the east side of the church, and tackle the roots in a future work week.

By the end of the day we had cleared most of the rhododendrons to the east of the church, making a huge green wall of leaves and branches. We also started to harvest the straight and thick branches to be used as poles for tree guards.

The man living in the building adjacent to the church, Frads wanted to know what will happen to the green wall of leaves. Perhaps he didn't like the removed rhododendrons to be left on the ground as uncared for litter? We said, we would like to transform the green wall to bio-char in future work weeks. He seemed to accept our reasoning, giving us the benefit of his doubts.

By the end of our second day we had cleared all the rhododendron above ground to the east of the church, and built a guard for a native tree across the street out of



harvested rhodie branch and brambles. This has been quite remarkable for us, showing the strength of what 6 people who work in harmony could achieve in such a short time.

Looking that this area, I am aware the soil is under-nourished and the small grove of birch trees could benefit from succeeding trees to re-populate the ground. I can see from the picture a rowan tree on this land too. My suggestion for this ground is to remove the rhodie roots, dress the soil with bio-char, and to plant a diversity of trees such as oak, hazel, willow, and rowan. We could build the more natural guards with rhodie and brambles instead of fencing wire here.

Alan had found an acorn, sprouting, ready to grow. It felt like the right moment to pass the acorn to Aayana, maybe a future tree-woman? The passing of the acorn became a 'lorax moment' to be captured in a photo.



Day three was a day for local heroes. Robert, Yvonne, Peter, and Ralph joined us for the morning shift. A strong masculine energy blended with softer feminine holding, tackled the rhododendrons around the church building first. We removed the roots of the plants in the beginning. As we moved to the higher grounds to the west of the church, the plants became denser. There had been a clearing here in the past, with the roots left in the ground. We cut back the branches, removed some roots, but left most of the roots in the ground. We harvested some branches for our tree-guards

Some people stayed for 1/2 day while others stayed for the whole day. Ralph wrote to me after this day saying :

The work we did helped me to understand how to progress with my own aims for a small area near where I live in Sheilfoot and I feel much more confident about how to do this. I will be trying to get others in the village involved as well. Some already are, others, I suspect, will be sceptical.

In the evening three more people joined us as guests. Their presence contributed to a major break-through for us in terms of outreach. Dorota is a natural social weaver. She brought her friend Lucia from China. Indira is an

artist for sacred songs. Her presence and contribution became very significant on day 6. In the evening of day 3, we had a surprise visit by two friends from Iran who brought a Sema Dancer with them from Belarus. Suddenly around our dinner table we were speaking in Farsi, Polish, and English. One of our objectives, thereby, to involve people from the Fertile Crescent was partially met.

On day four we returned to the ground, to the west of the church. The sea of rhododendrons here appear to be un-ending. It could be discouraging if you want to measure how much rhododendron there are, and make a linear plan to remove them. It is best to just make a start and put our intention into the ground to remove all the plants, with their roots. This is what we did. Mark joined us mid-morning with his electric chain saw. Jean joined us again in the afternoon. We all worked very hard, each one of us doing our best, in our own unique ways.

We made a decent dent in the body of the rhododendrons occupying the potential forest in this area, giving the birch and oaks of the field space to breathe. We left some rhodie roots upturned, but we left most of the roots in the ground.



I planted an oak sapling here as a trial to make a guard with rhodie harvest. The concept could work, but it takes very long to make the guard. Perhaps we could involve the students from an art university or college to spend a week with us and make use of the rhodie harvest to make creative guards for young trees?

Day five was our tree-planting day. We gave ourselves a well deserved morning off. By the time we gathered ourselves, and the tree-planting materials, the air was becoming permeated by smoke particles from fires to the north and the south of us. But there was nothing we could do for the fires in the distance. So we concentrated on what we could do and started tree-planting.

We had identified a suitable ground covered in brown bracken leaves, indicating good soil. Our tree-planting is what enabled this week to happen at all, as a friend from Findhorn community funded us to plant a memorial grove for a dear one who passed away in January. I bought 50 oaks, 25 hazels, 25 wych elm trees from Eigg tree-nursery. In addition, we are given another 25 sessile oaks from a community tree-planting in Glenuig which could not incorporate the oaks on their plot.

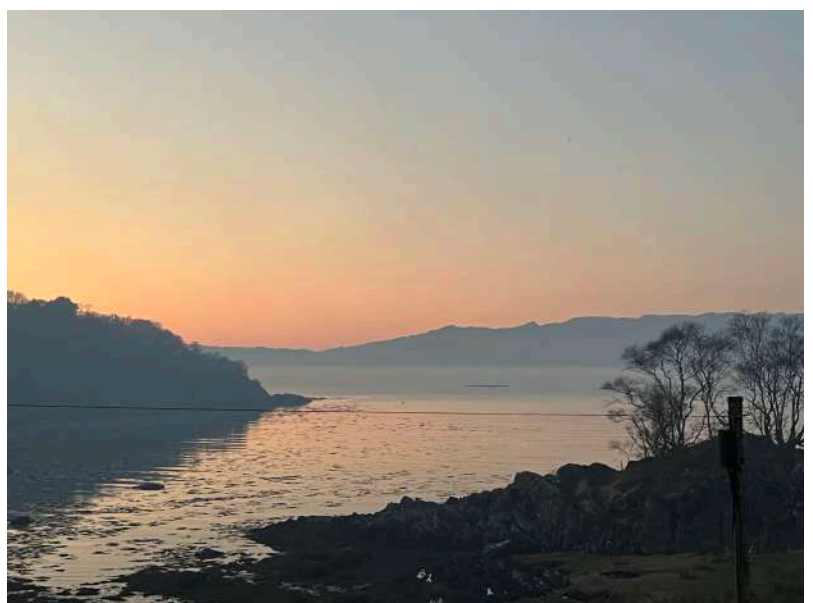


Alan started us off by showing us how to plant a tree. As this was a significant teaching point, I filmed him, and broadcasted the video on my social media. This moment received quite a lot of attention from the public. Our small group then set off, tree-planting and making guards. The soil on the slope was quite thin in many places. Our challenge was to find suitable ground where we could place the guards deeply enough.

By the evening a thick layer of smoke had covered the land. We knew the fires were burning on the hills not too far from Glenuig.

Day six turned out to be baptism by fire day, not only for us but for all who were touched by the hill fires in Moidart. The fire had walked the land as far south as Acharacle, creeping and spreading north. The reasons for the spread of fire were several, the dry conditions of the past days, the direction of the wind, a lack of forest cover.

We started the day as planned, on the hills, ready for action. By the mid-afternoon, it became clear that the fire was getting dangerously close to us. Mark had left for his village as



soon as he sensed the fire was alive and consuming the hills. By the time I walked back to our cottage, the fire engine were in position to save the shop in Glenuig, with the fire a few meters behind it.

In an emergency mode, each person did what they could to help, or to cope with the fires. I later learned that the fire rescue team put all their energy and resources into saving people's lives and homes. They did a splendid job, as no one was hurt, at least physically, with the fires. The hill-fire, however, did take a high emotional toll on those who experienced it first hand.

As with any emergency people connected and checked-on each other. Neighbours attended neighbours. A heightened sense of alarm and care was awakened in the community.

In the evening of Thursday 20th April, about 5 fire-engines were parked outside the Inn. This is of course, the community hang out place. So people gathered to pick up the fire stories, when it was safe to relax.

I was humbled by the force of the fire, and awed by the competency of the fire rescue team. A sense of comradeship that emerged as a result of the fire, showed me that we can rise to the challenge of the moment, when pushed.



The symbology of the fire on our tree-planting week does not escape me. Indeed as the fire was blazing through our tree-planting site, I was on a call with Humanity Rising, a global platform for creative responses to our planetary emergency with climate change, etc. I shared our news with the other panelist and learned that every one had experienced a fire in their communities due to climate change.

The need to revive the Atlantic Rainforest was brought home to me, and many of us who allowed the fire to touch our souls, with the grief of the land after the flames.

The day after the fire, our last planned day for this iteration of our work week, I found us surrounded by many helping hands, willing



to go back to the now blackened hill and replant. There was a different sense present in us. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, the American storyteller and writer, explains that after a loss of innocence comes awareness, a grounded intelligence capable of discernment. If we were to discern in our senses, after this fire, it was about priorities.

We checked all the tree-guards. To our relief we found out that a good number of saplings escaped being burned, due to us clearing the dry bracken leaves around the guards. We replanted in the guards with burned saplings. Then we planted some more trees and erected new guards. A few of us worked an extra shift in the afternoon, after our programme had ended, planting even more trees, until we were completely exhausted. A sense of ‘let’s give back to this hill what we can,’ carried us on its wings.

We completed our first work week in Glenuig with a circle of sharing using a talking piece. Each person who was present shared their experience, their learnings, with the others. I felt our nascent week of community and rainforest engagement opened a window to see the possibilities and practicalities involved in grounding a project to work with members of the local community and volunteers from other communities to care for this landscape.

I realised how much time, energy, and dedication this project requires. Obviously what this landscape, the Moidart peninsula, needs to revive is far



beyond any one person, organisation, or community. However a synergy arises when a number of people with the same purpose put their time and energy together to act for nature. This week has shown me a taste of this synergy.

Each person who joined our first work week, contributed their unique energy to the pool of synergy we created. We each did what we could, and this was enough.

Trees for Hope is grateful to all the people and partners who helped to make this week take shape. We are aware of the enormity and scope of what is involved to remove the rhododendrons from Moidart, to bring more people to plant trees and revive the rainforest. We are placed in a position to bring various elements together to create a synergy needed to further the path of rainforest restoration. Some of these elements include knowhow, tools and trees, volunteers from further afield. We would like to continue our collaboration with the community in Glenuig and Roshven within the larger context of Moidart, to demonstrate a well-grounded rewilding project for the rainforest of the area. By doing so we would be fulfilling one of our core objectives. We hope that we will be able to go further together in cycles of time.

Pupak Haghghi . 30th April, 2023

