

# Community & Rainforest Engagement Week II

13-19 May 2023, Glenuig



Trees  
for Hope Report

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# Reviving the Atlantic Rainforest

13 - 19 May, 2023, Glenuig

The idea to revive the Atlantic Rainforest could sound preposterous to some. With 1% of the once majestic forest remaining, and that 1% being seriously undermined by the invasive *Rhododendron ponticum*, and overgrazing by deer, for those who are aware of the implications of the forest disappearing, the choice remains to do anything possible to give the disappearing forest a chance to revive.



With this thought and intention, also wanting to weave our learnings and actions with the revival of the Fertile Crescent network, we put a call out to gather volunteers and folks from the local community to join us for this week. We had the commitment of a family in Findhorn and had planned the week according to their school holiday. That one commitment enabled others to join. Two families from Ukraine who are guests of the Findhorn Community joined us spontaneously in the week leading up to our workshop. I received this heartfelt message from Anna as I was getting ready to pick them up from Fort William : 'Thank you for such opportunity for me and my daughter. This was my dream since the war started.'

Reflecting on Anna's note of appreciation, I realised this was my dream too since the war started. But the war I had lived through between Iran and Iraq had started way back in 1980. It has taken me 33 years to arrive at a time and place where we could engage with the landscape to heal our own wounded hearts and leave a caring touch for the land.

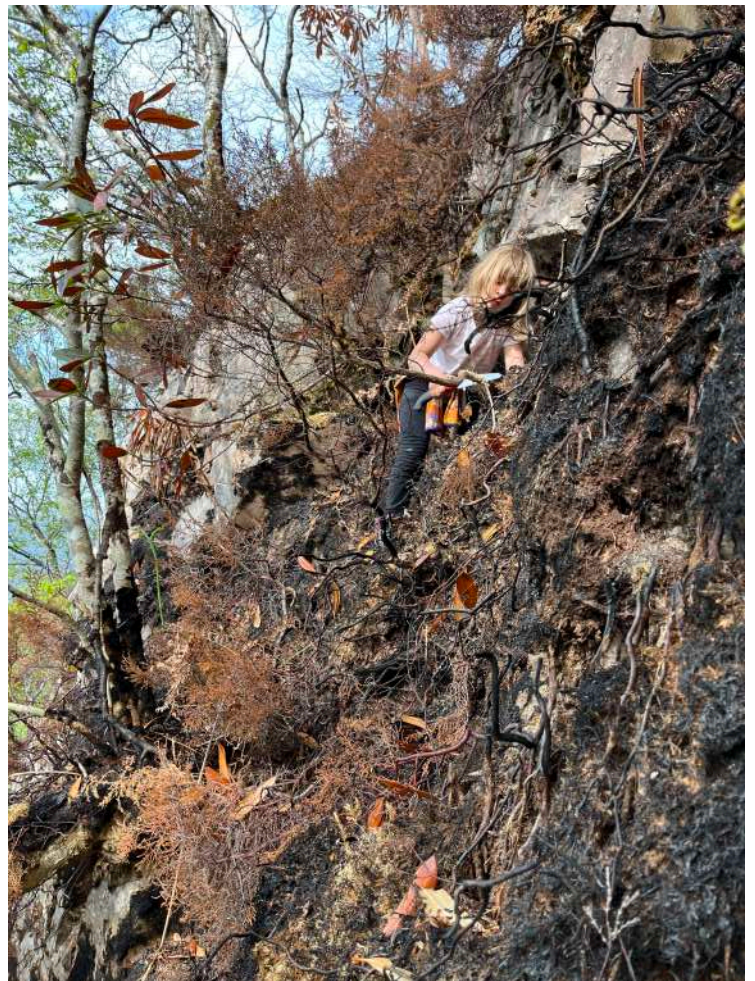


So our engagement week to revive the rainforest began. A major task includes removing rhododendrons completely from the landscape. This could appear to be a war on rhododendrons. It's been very important for me that we don't declare a war on rhododendrons but find a path of co-creation, together with



the invasive plant to revive the rainforest. I have been asking this question of the plant ever since I knew we will be engaging to remove it completely from the landscape. Fortunately I live in the Findhorn Community where communication with plant-devas are common place, since this is part of the story of our beginnings. So I asked the Rhododendron ponticum deva how can we work in harmony together to revive the Atlantic Rainforests in Western Scotland? The plant showed me that it is pointing the

way to where the forests need to be, since it flourishes where conditions are right for trees. When people engage with them to remove them in peaceful ways, the plant helps the people to shine out their true colours. This is how the people become rainbow soldiers, by working with the plant and the forest, rather than controlling and dominating the landscape. So I communicated this piece of wisdom



from the plant before we started our activity to remove the rhododendrons along the A861 up from the Glenuig shop towards Kinlochmoidart.

I don't know exactly what other people's experiences had been when we worked to remove the rhododendrons. My own experience had been remarkable, especially when I worked with our youngest volunteer, Veronica, Anna's daughter. To tell the truth when Veronica arrived and until I engaged with her in the forest, she had been exhibiting an agitated energy. She is a young seven-year-old who is uprooted from Ukraine. She communicates fluently in Russian and Ukrainian, and her English is on the edge of becoming. I found Veronica walking next to me when I was heading for a steep slope. She had a folding saw in her hand. 'Ok, let her join me,' I thought, 'I'll ask her to uproot the little plants.' So I did, and showed her the small plants. But soon she showed me what she could do with her saw on very steep slopes. I confess there were moments I prayed with all my might for her safety, and held her tight where she could have fallen. She must have felt it. We didn't need a spoken language to communicate, but could say everything we needed to say with our body language. We climbed higher and higher on the hill, till we reached the charred patches, blackened by the fire in April. As the landscape became steeper to negotiate, our communication and bonding became stronger. Here Veronica really showed me her true colours. She didn't miss a plant. As if given sharp hawk eyes, she spotted all the plants and cut them down carefully, then folded her saw with ultimate mindfulness.

If there is such a thing as a rainbow soldier, I saw it in Veronica when we were on the hills engaging to remove the rhododendrons. When we came down from the hill, all the pedagogical models I have had in my head were turned upside down, thanks to the courage and colours of my youngest friend. I am also grateful to Veronica's mother who trusted her to accompany me on the hills. Health and safety, somehow takes on a different shade when you engage your heart, alongside the logical measures.

Over three days of rhododendron removal along the A861, we were joined in by two guests from the US, Fletcher and his mother Jennifer, and Robert Clegg and his nephew Jamie from Glenuig, as well as our base camp crew, Adelaide, Udo, and their son Louis, Sandra + Victor, Anna + Veronica. A brief visit by Dorota and Suzanne brought new connections and vigour to our activities. Frances joined us for a morning to assure us of her support. By the end of the third day we had amassed a big fat pile of brash as well as a decent size of usable poles for tree-



guards. With thanks to Pod and Tad, the mountain of brash was removed to the Crushing site. Some roots of the plant were removed and some were left in the ground on this working site.

I think the cut rhododendrons have a huge potential yet untapped. As a glass artist, I would like to incorporate them in my work as frame. Similarly each professional artist could find a way to tap into the potential of this marvellous material. This area is yet to be explored.

We moved on to tree-planting on our fourth day. It is with thanks to Eoghan's releasing my invitation letter to the Genuig / Roshven community that Jean Bowker from Roshven and Karina McQuillan from Lochailort could join us. We continued with planting more oaks, hazel, and wych elm, guarded by the rhododendron poles we harvested earlier in the week. Later, Jean wrote us to say : 'Thank you so much for the opportunity to join you yesterday and the vision and hard work you have done over the years to make Trees for Hope happen. It was wonderful to help create something that will benefit everyone in so many different ways in the future.

It was also a joy to meet such a diverse mix of folk especially Sandra and Anna. Their strength and determination to get on with life, despite the horrific circumstances that led them to be here instead of at home in their own country, was fantastic.'

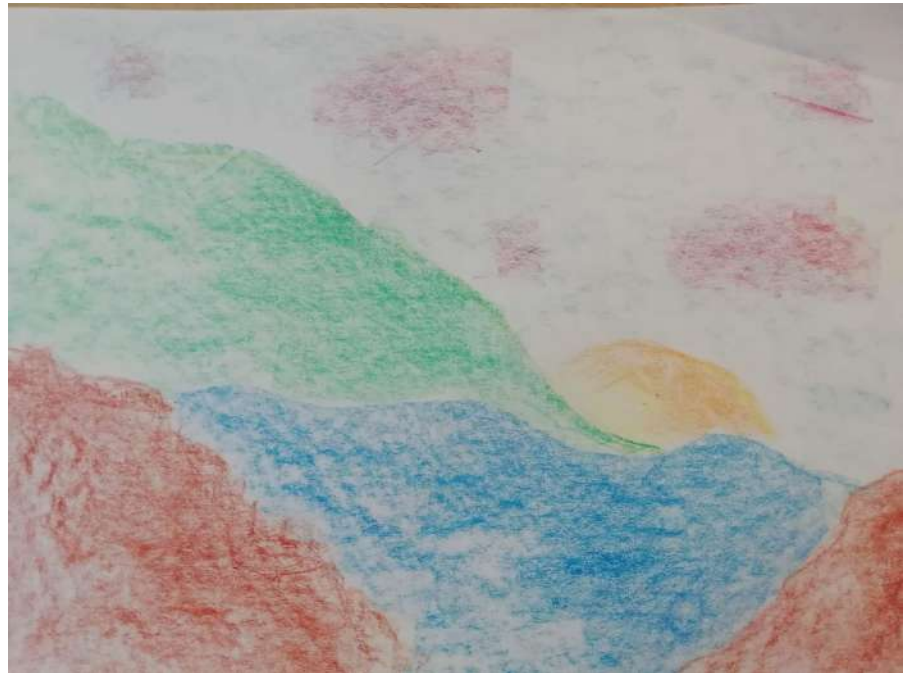
We completed the tree-planting on this hill on our last day. Looking back on the hill with over a hundred young trees, I can imagine a young grove becoming a small forest in a few decades.



Looking at the naked hills in Moidart, the hill we planted appears as a tiny little dot. But large oaks grow from small acorns. We hope to inspire many more people to get organised and mobilise a volunteer work force together with the local communities to re-cover the naked hills with native trees. This is how the hills want to be when the grazing pressure is removed from them. For Trees for Hope, planting a dedicated grove has helped us financially. We would like to continue with planting dedicated groves in our next weeks, to help with the recovery of the rainforest and to secure a financial source for our operation.

When our guests, or volunteers, returned home I received a message from one of our younger participants, Caitlin, with the painting here to the right. She wanted to share her impression of the landscape. Unbeknown to her, painting an impression of the landscape was the first activity I had offered in our first week in April. The reason for this activity is to get a sense for the relationship with the intelligence of the landscape. It is an opening gesture. Our young volunteer has done exactly that. Receiving her painting was an affirmation about a relationship being created between our guests and the spirit of the place.

We left the seed-balls we made on our first morning of this week for another occasion to release on the barren hills. The seed-balls were made with birch seeds of the previous year, which we received from Tasha from Eigg Community tree-nursery. Releasing the seed-balls needs slightly more preparation than we had time for this week.



Another activity we did not have time for this week is putting tree-guards around the young saplings in the oak forest. This is a vital move to ensure a future for the oakwood in Samalaman. I managed to protect a small stand of 3 oaks with some rhododendron poles and brambles. But there are hundreds of young trees needing guards, for this forest to have a future. This is where the local community needs to get involved.

I left a bunch of rhododendron poles by the kitchen side of the Hall. I'd like to ask the folks who visit the Samalaman woods to go there prepared to protect the young saplings. You need to take strong leather gloves with you and an implement to cut some brambles. Then grab a few poles and make a sturdy guard around the young trees in the wood. This simple act would make a difference for the future of the forest. Thank you for making a difference.

