



CALUM MACLEOD

Norman MacCaig's epic poem 'A man in Assynt' famously asks

*"Who owns this landscape? -  
The millionaire who bought it or  
the poacher staggering downhill  
in the early morning  
with a deer on his back?"*

Fast-forward the 50 or so years since the poem's publication and you might be tempted to add smartphone-brandishing tourists eager for a selfie and another tick on their 'beauty-spot' bucket lists to MacCaig's cast of characters laying claim to some of rural Scotland's most iconic settings.

That's certainly been the case in

# Fairy Glen furore highlights wider landscape concerns

Skye's Fairy Glen for quite some time, but tourists' encounters with that landscape have involved bestowing unwelcome — from the perspective of locals, at least — punctuation marks in the form of the cairns many insist on building there to mark their visit and doubtless share on social media.

As last week's gloriously-headlined front-page story in this paper highlighted ("Cairn madness at Fairy Glen sparks action"), some of these locals have had enough and taken it upon themselves to remove the offending items, which they maintain are a health and safety hazard and lead to the erosion of the environment. Some tourists were apparently less than thrilled at their mini-monuments to themselves being removed, according to Claire Irons, the Uig resident whose Facebook post and accompanying photo inspired the cairn clear-up a couple of weeks ago. It seems that Hell hath no fury like tourists deprived of their selfie props.

In its modest way, the Fairy Glen furore provides a stone-strewn vignette of wider and more deep-

seated issues concerning how rural landscapes are valued, consumed and, in another nod to MacCaig, how they are possessed. And, crucially, in whose interests these processes are played out.

Some of these questions are explored in 'Community Empowerment and Landscape', a new research report by Inherit: the Institute for Heritage and Sustainable Human Development in collaboration with Community Land Scotland, the membership organisation for Scotland's community landowners.

The report examines how 'landscape policy' — a convenient shorthand for the laws, designations and associated initiatives dealing with conservation and management of the 'landscape', 'historic environment' and 'natural heritage' dimensions of rural places — is implemented by Scottish Natural Heritage and Historic Environment Scotland, the main Government agencies responsible for putting that policy into practice.

Not particularly well from a community perspective, as it turns out. According to the report's author,

Dr Chris Dalgligh, the research's key finding is that communities feel "locked out" of landscape designation decisions that affect their lives, leading to a "participation deficit" that leaves them largely disempowered in determining the characteristics of the landscapes of which they are the living, human dimension.

Does that matter? Read the whole of 'A man in Assynt' and you'd be forgiven for concluding that it probably does not, as MacCaig dismisses his "false questions" concerning ownership and possession of a landscape that is

*"masterless  
and intractable in any terms  
that are human"*

Well, perhaps. However, the human dimension certainly does intrude into the distinctly unpoetic world of landscape policy management. Or at least the institutional dimension does because, as the 'Community Empowerment and Landscape' report shows, there is a tendency to see landscape matters — in terms of

defining their characteristics and 'special' qualities — as the exclusive preserve of professionals and institutions underpinned by a 'fence and exclude' conservation culture that treats development simply as a threat.

The most obvious example of that approach is the creation of Scotland's 42 wild land maps covering some 3.7 million acres of rural Scotland, most of them in the west Highlands and Islands. These maps are underpinned by a highly-subjective list of supposedly 'special' qualities that conveniently airbrush the 'people' dimension out of great swathes of the rural landscape. You can add Scotland's 40 National Scenic Areas and countless other conservation designations into that same mix.

That's not to say that 'conservation' or 'development' should be a binary, 'either-or' choice. However, as 'Community Empowerment and Landscape' also shows, there needs to be some radical rethinking of how landscape policy is conducted to make it more attuned to the principles of

sustainable development than it currently is. That implies integrating consideration of human rights and wider social and economic consequences into the process of applying and managing natural and historic heritage designations. It also implies a culture change on the part of public agencies to enable communities' voices to be heard much more prominently in landscape policy than has hitherto been the case.

Hovering high above these issues are two vital questions; namely who and what are Scotland's rural places for? Anyone who thinks these fundamental questions about the future of rural Scotland are uncontested might be well advised not to build any cairns in the Fairy Glen any time soon.

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