

CROSS PARTY GROUP: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

8 OCTOBER 2014

COMMITTEE ROOM 3, SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

1PM – 2.30PM

Attendees: Sarah Boyack MSP, Patrick Harvie MSP, Clare Adamson MSP, Axelle Walcott, David Stevenson, Beth Savage, Jessica Boucher, Jamie Maxwell, Pat Bryden, Pat Hiddleston, Georgy Davis, Chris Stephenson, Rachel Hamada, John Francis, Michael Freudenberg, Ptolemy McKinnon, Jason Gilchrist, Paul Dawber, Stephen Porch, Mark Johnston, David Somervell, Hannah Kippax, Kim Leyland, Zoe Hopkins, Camilla Chiggins, Tim Goucher, Hassan Waheed, Pupak Haghghi.

Apologies: Jeni McKay, Sarah Jones, Rob Crawford, Agnes Holmes, Gillian Wilson, Rachel Campbell, Ryan McQuigg, Linda Todd.

Welcome and Introduction

Sarah Boyack MSP opened the meeting and thanked everyone for attending this special meeting of the CPG on Rewilding. Sarah introduced the two speakers, George Monbiot, who is a Guardian columnist and author, and Alan Watson Featherstone, who is the executive director of Trees for Life, a charity working to restore Scotland's ancient Caledonian forest.

Presentation by George Monbiot, Writer and political activist

George Monbiot started his presentation by citing an alarming report published by WWF which has found that 52% of wildlife has vanished in the last 40 years.

In the past, all eco-systems were dominated by mega fauna, even in the United Kingdom. He stated that it is a much less exciting world nowadays as we had removed much of what made life magic. It might be believed that we cannot fight it but environmental organisations can make the world less bad that it would otherwise be.

He added that corporate power is too strong nowadays and that all efforts are made to keep the line instead of trying to make the world better.

George claimed that rewilding is a vision that we can visualise before it can actually be seen. Furthermore, he believes that we can undo some damage, especially in Scotland where there are many opportunities to do so. In Scotland, the land was often used in a destructive and exclusive manner and a very small number of people own most of the Scottish lands. Moreover, it is still allowed to burn lands in Scotland and parts of the Highlands look like a patchwork as a result. However, there are great opportunities to use the lands differently. People have started to do so and in few parts of Scotland, trees are coming back. It is a

starting point for the vision of a better world and local economies could benefit from it. Rewilding of that kind would revitalise the land but also the local economy.

George ended his presentation by stating that rewilding is a positive vision to aim for, you can see the good thing you are aiming at.

Presentation by Alan Featherstone, Executive director, Trees for Life

Alan Featherstone started his presentation showing a photograph of the earth taken in the late 1960s. Most of it is desertified lands. It is far from the picture it could have been a long time ago when many extinct species were still alive. Alan argued that this photograph constitutes a call for help, it is the picture of a wounded world.

Alan argued that the need for rewilding is pressing. The percentage of original forest remaining in the world is extremely small. For instance, only 3% of the Caledonian Forest is left in Scotland even though forests are the home of wildlife.

Alan continued his presentation stating that many species are disappearing and that this is a symptom of a dying world. For example, American bison reduced from 30 million in 1800 to 1,000 in 1889. He claimed that we are drastically damaging the capacity of our planet to support life. Many species have become extinct recently, one of the latest examples being the Western black rhinoceros. He added that species are vanishing every day, some that we have not even ever heard of. Alan contrasted the sending of two recent space missions with the purpose to find life on Mars with the lack of care about all the life disappearing on earth.

As in many other parts of the world, Scotland's forests and wildlife are in a degraded condition. There was a massive environmental degradation and depopulation in the Highlands. His organisation, Trees for Life, has worked for 25 years to try to reforest Scotland. Alan showed two photographs to the audience that were taken at 25 years difference. On the first one we can only see dead Scots pines in a dying forest and on the second one of the same area we can see a new generation of pines now growing healthily thanks to protection. His organisation tries to restore healthy natural habitats from what he called geriatric forests. Alan explained that rewilding is about allowing natural ecological processes to prevail again. It is very simple, help the land to recover, give the nature a chance. Planting trees is sometimes necessary when the nature cannot regenerate itself and his organisation has now planted 1.2 million trees. When the trees recover, the wildlife comes back. Rewilding entails the recovery of the whole ecosystem and even permit the first record of species in Scotland.

Alan believes that the connection with the nature is very important and often missing in people's life. Taking part in rewilding brings hope and connects people with nature. People are really waking up to that and it might be linked to a greater sense of self-determination. He argued that Scotland has to be in a prime position to provide a positive role model.

Alan concluded that we must pass on a viable earth to the next generations. We are the generation who will make the difference. We need to revitalise and restore the planet.

Question and Answer session

A range of questions were asked following the presentation. Please note that it is not the intention of the minutes to record a verbatim account.

Patrick Harvie MSP highlighted the significance of the photographs showed by Alan which show the time scale for the land to start recovering. The problem is that political decisions are often short-term ones and it might feel normal to us that the earth looks like this.

George Monbiot made the point that we usually normalise the state of the world when we grow up. Most of the conservation groups would like the land to look like it was 100 years ago. But, why just protecting the life that was there 100 years ago? It is time to open people's minds. With a new vision, people can be inspired further. He argued that here is a constitutional resistance from NGOs.

Alan Featherstone added that his organisation has a '250 year's' vision and time frame, as that is the average life expectancy of Scots pine trees. But, in politics, short-time frames prevailed because of the next elections. We are sacrificing the future for satisfaction in the present. But we should ask ourselves, what are we going to pass on. He said that he is not blaming the past people but that we can no longer continue like this. Environment and ecology are still a very small part of economy and this should be changed: economy should no longer be the centre of the universe.

John Francis made the point that after observing in 1990 that there was a serious loss of habitats in Scotland, in 1991, legislation was introduced to protect key lands, which represents 20% of the lands in Scotland. It was a difficult battle against the forest industry.

Michael Freudenberg highlighted that in some East African countries, people are planting trees and the transformation is fabulous.

Rachel Hamada raised the concern that the New Alliance might not be a good thing.

Alan Featherstone stated that rewilding can only realistically happen if it is the local people who do it and added that there are three key elements of rewilding: local people, indigenous species, employment and local activities.

George Monbiot claimed that the New Alliance is an attempt from the government and corporations to reposition themselves as part of the solution and not as part of the problem. They want to monopolise the local market of the area of intervention. Corporate power is a threat. He raised concerns about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as the government would have to follow a set of rules that could prevent it from protecting its own people.

Sarah Boyack MSP highlighted the recent creation of the first national parks in Scotland and handed over to Patrick Harvie MSP.

David Stevenson made the point that when he sees the earth from space, what he sees is a lot of water. What about rewilding the seas and oceans?

Paul Dawber stated that the referendum was a very exciting period and wondered how to create a momentum for rewilding.

Alan Featherstone made the point that the scale of destruction in the sea is huge, 2/3 of fish stocks are overfished. We have moved down the fish chain and the consequences of that are very important. Rewilding can be only successful if we cut significantly our footprint and if we give more space to other species. All individuals should take responsibility to

reduce our needs (food, housing...). We need to scale back our impact. There is a dogma stating that we can go on endlessly with unlimited economic growth but it is madness. We should stop fighting the negative and instead create positive. He has found his power working with NGOs. Power is not with the politicians at the top but with everyone.

George Monbiot The marine reserve in Scotland is ridiculously small. Something incredible has happened in Scotland and it is here to stay. Main stream politics are failing to meet peoples' aspirations. Negative campaigns are needed but very often useless without positive campaigns.

Patrick Harvie MSP added that the power has to stay with everybody even after the referendum

Someone raised the point of African parks: what do you think about cross borders parks?

Alan Featherstone It is a very positive development but we have to be careful as it usually keeps the mentality that we dominate wildlife.

George Monbiot claimed that the benefit of those parks has to be for local people. It needs to be a movement from the bottom up, driven by local enthusiasm.

Someone raised the point of funding for rewilding projects in international development aid.

Patrick Harvie MSP answered that funding is very limited.

George Monbiot added that funds usually go to big projects.

Alan Featherstone highlighted that not only government's money can make a difference but that another type of aid that is important: human time. He encouraged people to volunteer in grass roots projects.

Patrick Harvie MSP closed the meeting and thanked George Monbiot and Alan Featherstone in particular and all attendees for the presentations and discussion.

Forthcoming meetings of the CPG:

- 18th November 2014
- 20th January 2015
- 24th March 2015
- 23rd June 2015 (AGM)

All meetings are held in the Scottish Parliament and commence at 5.30pm until 7pm