

**Future Forest
Caledonian
Aware Access
Black Wood**

*Environmental Artists Tim Collins and Reiko Goto &
Social Scientist Dr David Edwards*

A series of residencies and partnerships to produce sculpture, new media and sound artworks that promote public discourse about the cultural import of future forests in Perthshire.

FUTURE FOREST CALEDONIAN AWARE ACCESS BLACK WOOD



A Time Lapse of a Granny Tree in the Black Wood of Rannoch. Collins & Goto Studio, 2013

Extraordinary LIVING things can stop us in our tracks, and demand our attention. Other LIVING things become familiar through intimate experience and attention over time. If science is defined by useful general truths, is it the role of art and aesthetics to help us to see specific truths? In other words, if science informs us of what trees are as a set of things and how they function as biological organisms – is it aesthetics that are responsible for the pictures in our head, and the potential to differentiate unique and specific experiences of things in common from the general idea of how they relate to all other things? How do we value those things that envelop us with unexpected imaginative and aesthetic force?

Excerpt from “A Tree is a Living Thing: The Piper-Schelling Experiments” Collins and Goto, 2010

Collins & Goto Studio, Glasgow Scotland

Tim Collins and Reiko Goto are environmental artists, researchers and authors working together since 1985. Over the last fifteen years they have developed a research approach to artistic inquiry that has focused on the cultural aspects and experiences of environmental change with specific attention to ecosystems such as forests, rivers and landscapes. They worked closely with David Edwards, a social scientist at Forest Research on this project.

This chapter reflects on a process of being with people and trees in the Black Wood of Rannoch. The artistic intent was to make a small contribution to the well-being and prosperity of the forest communities of Rannoch, but also to think about what it means to make art with a forest, rather than in a forest or about a forest. The chapter examines the process and method, the visual/sensual – aesthetic inquiry as well as the social/cultural – aesthetic inquiry that took place over nine months. Below you will find an overview of method and context, some critical insight, followed by an assessment of the visual and social outcomes to date. What has emerged in the process is an understanding that science and culture are at cross-purposes in this historically and scientifically important Caledonian forest. An art and culture workshop provided a non-threatening context where imaginative realignment was initiated.

This project proposed to focus on the remnant pine forests that lie between the south shore of Loch Rannoch and the north shore of Loch Tay. Going in the artists wanted to explore the eco-aesthetic value, the experience and perception of the forest as cultural entity. As the project developed, the

collaborators did some work in Glen Lyon, but then followed the interests of the project partners, working on specific issues and opportunities in the Black Wood of Rannoch. This ancient semi-natural pinewood is the most significant Caledonian pinewood in the southern highlands, one of only six that cover more than 1000 hectares. Caledonian pinewoods are the largest continuous native woodlands in the UK. The artists worked with partners to understand concerns about access and awareness. They considered emergent ideas and policies related to cultural ecosystem services and values. The unexpected question that would ultimately define the project was whether the Black Wood could ever be branded as a unique forest in Scotland, and as a featured place within the community of Kinloch Rannoch.

What is a Cultural Ecosystem Service?

“The nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences.”

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005, p. 40

(Paraphrased) *It is a cultural value related to a place. It is a place or space of common or shared environmental experience. It includes cultural practices that are expressive and symbolic, embodied or interpretive interactions with an environment. It is about the sense of well-being that humans derive from interactions with a place.*

Church A., et al, Cultural Ecosystem Services and Indicators, 2014, p. 15

Methods and Context

The artists began to develop a critical forest art practice (see below) that sought to make a small contribution to the Black Wood and the forest communities that define it. The initial idea was to contribute to forest culture; the discussion amongst project partners would come to agree that there was a need for a broader discussion about the lack of a social and cultural relationship with the Black Wood. Working towards the visual/sensual aesthetic the artists embedded themselves in the forest as often as possible, walking and mapping, reading and making notes about what could be experienced easily and what required effort and attention over time. Daylong time-lapse photography and video journals were the methods used to capture the forest as a dynamic community in time. Working towards the social/cultural aesthetic, the residencies occurred in the Black Wood + Loch Rannoch community, the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, and at Forest Research in Roslin. The artists would work closely with the Forestry Commission to understand the forest management context and the issues related to overseeing a forest designated as a Special Area of Conservation. They spent time talking with planners at the Perth and Kinross Countryside Trust who were working to confirm and establish historic core trails through the forests of South Rannoch; and had a good handle on the politics of land use. The Rannoch community and the Forestry Commission kept the work grounded in specific issues, relationships at Forest Research insured a broader understanding of policy and decision-making, as well as an important context for reflection. As the artists worked, they refined their idea of what a critical forest art practice might be.

Ideas for a Critical Forest Art Practice

- To establish a model for art with forests rather than in forests. Considering the process, method and form of art as forest interface in a rural setting and as a correspondent image, idea or artifact in the urban setting.
- To experiment with the idea of empathic exchange between people and trees in urban and rural settings, to consider the ways that trees and forest embody culture and how people embody the forest in daily life, regular practices or celebration.
- To consider how art might contribute to the potential well-being or prosperity of a tree or forest community in the age of environmental change.

In the original proposal to 'Imagining Natural Scotland' Collins & Goto described "An interdisciplinary artistic inquiry that explores trees as the means by which nature (as a self generating entity) expresses itself." Methods to accomplish that goal included "...walking, talking, listening and practising within the forest and in relationship to working and leisure communities; to create a record of experience, reflection and learning." They would attend a series of residencies, developing 'artwork that functions as interface' enabling informed experience and an Imagining about future forest. Below the reader will find detail on the actualities.

Working with the P&K Countryside Trust and the Perth Museum the artists agreed to develop a Black Wood video, to be presented in the lobby complementing the Big Tree Exhibition. Working within the archives at the museum was relatively brief as there was very little that referred to the Black Wood. The library at the Forestry Commission was

Participant comment from The Forest is Moving: Future Forest Rannoch workshop. (Nov 2013) Summing up the common ground and the fundamental tensions amongst stakeholders.

BLACK WOOD
AGE
ICONIC
MAJESTIC
SUBLIMITY
HISTORY

PROTECT AND SAVE, or
PROTECT AND SHARE



a more significant resource. It took weeks of work to get a handle on what the Black Wood had become through evolving management and conservation science over the last fifty years. The artists were also meeting regularly with the Rannoch forest and trail interests often onsite. It began to make sense for everyone to gather for a collective walk in the Black Wood. As the walk began the Forestry Commission representative offered assurance of open access, but complicated that by saying 'there would be no encouragement of additional footfall' within the Black Wood. It was a curious day with some participants going off early to attend other meetings, some deciding it was a 'normal' level of land use tension and the artists trying to figure out how

best to respond. It became clear that the problems of 'public access' or 'public awareness' were largely defined in relationship to the ecologically sensitive forest estate. The culture of scientific conservation, which had been embraced (by Forestry Commission visionary Gunnar Godson) to protect the Black Wood from the shifting winds of the Forestry Commission itself, had slowly (and without malice) become a force that excluded all other social and cultural interests. This forced the artists to focus on the essential challenge of making a case for the value of arts and culture in an ancient semi-natural forest environment. How to establish an artistic and cultural discourse that might complement and/or change the management ethos.



*A time lapse of two regeneration sites in the Black Wood
Collins & Goto Studio, 2013*

The Workshop: Future Forest, Kinloch Rannoch

The workshop intended to introduce new ideas to help the participants talk about and reframe problems and imagine new solutions. It was suggested that cultural values could be objectified (as artifacts within a landscape), but also institutionalized (through language, stories, art, music or literature) or understood as ephemeral values embodied in users or practices, memories that occur in a place or in some aesthetic relationship or condition within the forest itself. It was argued that cultural values were an essential complement to the facts and data of science: the open-ended nature of the 'cultural question' made it useful as a framing device that challenged the linearity of ecosystem services assessment. Scholarly presentations on environmental aesthetics, art and literature, the descriptive qualities of the Gaelic language, and the aesthetics, ethics and politics of walking in Scotland, surprised some participants. Many came away with a more nuanced understanding of the iconic Black Wood and the cultural landscape it is embedded in.

Much of the effort involved building bridges – both socially and conceptually – between the exclusionary principles and agency of conservation science and the potentially inclusive domain of art and culture. Participants shared a sense of the forest as an important cultural symbol: an idea and an image with great social value, although it was not agreed where that value to society was properly accrued. Going into the workshop there was a general distrust across the stakeholders about

ethical responsibility for the forest ecosystem. This had largely dissipated by the end of the workshop. The cultural values that remained in tension focused on human exclusion to support biodiversity, the renewed interest in centuries old core paths in the region, and the idea that the forest (as a place) has essential cultural import for all of Scotland. The latter ideas (broadly) align with the Rannoch community's values associated with improvement to public awareness and access to the forest as an element of their tourist economy. But they remain opposed to the government agencies' own set of community values that constrained access based on the idea that keeping people out was the best approach to future forest well-being.

Within the workshop breakout groups there was recognition of the desire to promote a wider understanding of Black Wood history, ongoing research and the Forestry Commission's efforts to restore and extend the forest. Everyone agreed that to change the 'current' character of the Black Wood (with car parks, and interpretive signs) would be wrong. Questions about future aesthetic form, and a culture/ecology outcome were aired but not resolved. Questions about wilding, and radical restoration were not fully considered. Further planning exercises were desired as a means to address the conflict around awareness, access, branding and future form. Everyone agreed consideration should be given to development of a Caledonian Forest Way Initiative (through the Greater South Rannoch woodland complex) as described below. The initiative may be a first step to reclaim and enable a vibrant forest culture that moves from the Black Wood of Rannoch community out to Scotland and beyond.

The Caledonian Forest Culture Way

Joining up areas from Rannoch → to Loch Tulla → to Glen Lyon → and back to Rannoch

Taking advantage of the existing pine forests streams and trail infrastructure

Duncan Bàn MacIntyre as a focal point and initial literary landscape framework

Reading, walking and talking along long distance footpaths, considering urban/rural

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Skye, as a residential model – writers, artists and musicians working

A forest culture collection established over time in Rannoch with and for the forest

Working at Forest Research after the workshop the dialogue focused on the role that culture might play in defining the future forest. There were questions about the historic conditions and the aesthetic and ethical elements of future virtues. The artists and scientist worked on a framework for rigorous imagination that reflects on the past to understand the present and balances human interest and ethical obligation for the health and well-being of the forest. Below is the first reflection on an initial reading of history after the two month residency.

*Community gathering for the Future Forest Tour
Collins & Goto Studio, 2013*



Seeing the Black Wood in Time

Arriving by car or on a bicycle from the train station one approaches the Black Wood via the road that borders the southern shore of Loch Rannoch; entering along various trails that move in a southerly direction. The trails are found between the bridges over Dall burn to the east and Camghouran burn to the west. One enters the Black Wood moving gently uphill, the forest is alternately open and closed with a mix of birch and pine, a bit of rowan and juniper all growing across a range of age groups from saplings to mature trees. The most memorable trees of the Black Wood are 200-300 year old 'granny pines' with great sprawling limbs. One is immediately struck by the forest and its relationship to a curious topography, a mix of small glacial 'moraine' deposits or hillocks with a never-ending repetition of smaller hummocks of blaeberry, cowberry, bracken and heather. The hummocks are vegetation formed over large rocks and tree stumps, creating an unusual 'lumpy' forest floor that adds texture to the rolling mound-and-hollow topography. But it is the granny pines that deserve our attention, why are they here and why so many of them?

To clearly see the Black Wood one has to grasp the past, present and future in terms of the three hundred year life cycle of a Scots pine tree and its relationship to the use of the land across that period of time. It can be easily understood that the broadly branched 'granny pines' of the Black Wood have little value as timber. Over two hundred and fifty years the forest would have been picked through consistently, most recently with significant harvest during World War II and again during the first decade of Forestry Commission ownership.

But what was it that created the conditions on the ground that kept the forest open and producing the 'granny' form, rather than a tightly spaced forest where trees must grow straight and tall to reach the light? According to Lindsay (1974) the eighteenth century tenants had goats, some cattle, sheep and small horses that would shelter and feed in the wood. This was a difficult time to live in the largely Jacobite Rannoch Valley, where estate land was forfeited to the crown repeatedly and a barracks built in the valley to suppress resistance. Tenant livestock would not be excluded from the forest by fencing until the later part of that century when the property was still held by the forfeited estates commission.

According to Smout (2000) by the middle of the nineteenth century the Highland clearances were just about complete. With sheep replacing people, the forest was again struggling to regenerate itself. Steven and Carlisle (1959) tell us at the end of the nineteenth century another fence was erected, to create a deer forest for the hunting estate, new trees and young trees that might have had a chance with free range sheep would have no chance with an enclosed population of red deer! In the twentieth century the fences were down again, deer were set free, but sheep were back in the Black Wood. Thus generation after generation of creatures would have eaten most of the young trees, goats and deer would have changed the shape of saplings and the understory as well. These are the conditions that shaped an open forest structure where the few trees that could get away, were able to grow into the light both horizontally as well as vertically. Through the years, the straight trees would have been targeted for harvest. It is interesting to think that the Black Wood actually embodies the complicated land use history of Scotland.

V.M. Thom contributing to the 'Native Pinewoods of Scotland' symposium at Aviemore in 1975 considers the experience of the pine wood forty years ago.

"...anyone entering a pinewood finds that the trees, spacing and light in a pine forest is satisfying to the eye. Complementing this is a unique and striking combination of colours that are unlike other trees in the forest and a general perception of ruggedness and strength."

(Thom, 1977, p. 101)

Having described the commerce and management relationships that have shaped the aesthetic form of the Black Wood it is important to consider this history in terms of the social/cultural relationship to the Black Wood. According to A.H. Millar (1909) the Robertson estate was forfeit in 1690, 1715 and again in 1745, this was a landscape of confusion and conflict for those left behind. The land clearances occurred through the mid-nineteenth century, reducing the population by more than 50%, sheep farming replacing tenant farming. This was followed by rapid loss of the Scottish Gaelic language in Loch Rannoch in the 20th century (Duwe, 2008). The Ordinance Survey maps retain a cultural record of Gaelic place names, which few fully appreciate today. This is a long and tragic history of social, political, and economic displacement, complicated by the loss of a language and culture, followed by the past fifty years of conservation management that displaces social interest, yet again.

*Coille Dhubh Rainich
– Black Wood of Rannoch*

Coille Mhòr – Big Wood

*Druim nan Crann Saighde
– Ridge of the Arrows*

Allt Madaig – Burn of the Dog

Meall a' Mhuic – Hill of the Pig

*Creagan no Corr
– Crag of the Heron*

*Allt Leac Ghubrgis
– Burn of the Pinewood*

Creagan na Corr – Crag of the Goats

Meall an Stalcair – Hill of the Stalker

Carn Gorm – Green Cairn

Creag an Daimh – Crag of the Stag

Glenn Sassunn – Saxon Glen

Geal Chàrn – White Crag

Creag Mhor – Large Crag

Meal Dearg – Red Hill

*Some of the place names of Rannoch.
Translated by Beathag Mhoireasdan, 2014*

...ric moment when the Black Wood was saved by science, and the need for renewed public interest as a result of that on

*A still from The Forest is Moving /
Tha a' Chaille a' Glusad
Collins & Goto, 2013*



Black Wood of Rannoch

...ing that shapes culture as surely as culture shapes it. We want to consider the historic moment when the Black Wood w

In conclusion

The question of making art 'with a forest' is complicated by the tension between the ideas that people are a part of nature yet people have a negative impact on nature. Working with a forest, means trying to find some way to contribute to its generative and regenerative potential, which means thinking in centuries and trying to see the past 300 years and its effect today. The Forestry Commission talks about 'leaving it alone' but the meaning of that is largely defined by a lack of harvest, there is much to restore and manage. There is a question of the future form of the Black Wood that requires serious debate. This requires some soul searching about the forms of a nature-of-culture versus ideals of nature-without-human relationship. What are the values of each, and which is in the best interests of the forest itself, the community of Rannoch, and the culture of Scotland?

Supporting this dialogue, the artists have assembled an extensive body of time-based media work. A 15 minute video, 'The Forest is Moving / Tha a' Choille a' Gluasad', was featured in the lobby of the Perth Museum for the month of December. There are four other time-based projects that need to be edited and assembled into a singular video installation for exhibition. A large body of Gaelic landscape description has just been translated as this chapter is written. It will be worked into a map and a final report to be presented to the project partners. Students from Art Space and Nature at University of Edinburgh were in the Black Wood with the artists and members of the Rannoch community the last weekend of March.

*Timothy M Collins, Reiko Goto
with David Edwards*



Lead participants

Tim Collins and Reiko Goto are environmental artists, researchers and authors working together since 1985. Over the last fifteen years they have developed a research approach to artistic inquiry that has focused on the cultural aspects and experiences of environmental change with specific attention to ecosystems such as forests, rivers and landscapes.

Dr David Edwards is a Senior Social Scientist at Forest Research, the research agency of the UK Forestry Commission. He has 20 years' experience of interdisciplinary land-use research in Europe, Africa and South Asia. His research seeks to ensure that social and cultural values are incorporated better into forest landscape decision-making.

Developed with:

The Rannoch Paths Group

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Loch Rannoch Conservation Association

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More Information

To access a blog about the project, the artwork, the workshop programme, video clips of the presentations and the final report to the partners see <http://eden3.net/future-forest/>.

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