DISAPPEARING BIODIVERSITY IN THE HIGHLANDS.

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I photographed a small haymeadow in Glenleraig, Assynt, Sutherland, in 1965, and again in 2000. The picture above is a close-up of the common haymeadow flowers which bloomed there in 1965: there are ox-eye daisies and hawkweeds visible at the higher level - also sorrel and knapweed, with (elsewhere) pignut and meadowsweet. Below that is a lot of red clover, (with some white), and below that, lots of eyebright.

1 General view of the small haymeadow in Glenleraig: 1965

2 The same view - check the buildings - (trees planted) : 2000

3 Another view: up the small meadow; 1965.

4 Longer view up the same meadow: 2000

5 Walking downhill, 1971. Far fewer flowers, but still little bracken.

6 Walking downhill, 2000. The ‘hump’ (behind the dog in top), helps orientate you. The first rank of trees to the right of the hump is all planted, bar the circular, lighter green dome halfway between the cottage and sheds, which is the same small willow seen in the top pic, to the far right, below the bend in the road.

This story is quite simple, and repeated all over the Highlands.

We don't know much that is specific to this glen in its history; it may have been populated in the Bronze Age, but was certainly inhabited in the succeeding Iron Age, and almost definitely occupied by the Vikings probably around 1000 AD. Much later, by the time of the Survey of Assynt by John Home, undertaken in 1774 AD, when it was part of the extensive Sutherland Estates, the glen was part of the traditional , pre-Clearance 'farm' of Glenleraig, and had 90 inhabitants. These people depended on small-scale agriculture for survival, and haymeadows like the above must have been an important part of that agriculture.

By 1959, when my family arrived in the glen, this small, remaining meadow was no longer cut for hay, but some sheep, (probably the ewes in lamb) were kept in the larger Back Park, (of which the meadow was part), until after lambing. The result, for a few years, was this wonderful show of meadow-flowers, alive with bees and butterflies; photographed in July 1965.

In 1966, the traditional sheep farm became a more mixed agricultural enterprise, and the Back Park was used for longer in the Spring, reducing the show of flowers. Then, sometime after 1972, the farmer cut many of the neighbouring hazels, which had been suppressing the bracken which was always present around the edge of the meadow.

Then in 1976, the farm was given up entirely, and not replaced with any agricultural activity. The heavy hooves of the cattle had been holding back the soft, spring growth of the bracken; once they had gone, it rapidly took over the whole of the little, stepped, 'alps' in the Back Park (and much further). By 2000, when I took the final photographs, the bracken covered everything, was dense, and over 6 feet in height.

A small and beautiful island of biodiversity had completely disappeared, along with the centuries of small-scale agriculture which had maintained it.

In the same period, the lower-lying part of the Front Park, close to the cottage, which had a few rushes in it in 1965, (to the right of the cottage, in 5 above), had become totally dominated by dense growth of soft rush. In both small areas, biodiversity has been greatly reduced, in only 35 years.

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