

DUNLOSSIT ESTATE

BEYOND “PIGS IN BRACKEN”**PURPOSE OF PAPER:**

- to record progress beyond the paper “Pigs in Bracken” published on the Grazing Animals Project website in 2006 (crassly not dated in the original)
- to record some of the political reactions to the use of pigs from various authorities and regulatory bodies

1 PROGRESS ON BRACKEN:

1.1 At the conclusion of “Pigs in Bracken” we were poised to release pigs on to the wider moorland in the expectation that they would target bracken slopes and knolls. The Scottish Government Environmental and Rural Affairs Department¹ indicated that they would consider the free-range use of pigs on moorland which was actively being managed under the Rural Stewardship Scheme as a major breach of the contract. They ‘helpfully’ suggested that we could electric fence each individual bracken knoll for the duration of the pigs’ attentions. They apparently failed to realise that this would make it necessary to send vehicles tracking across the fragile moorland to move pig accommodation, haul bowzers of water and attend to the pigs’ daily management needs, not to mention escalating the costs of bracken management to exorbitant levels. Needless to say, we declined.

1.2 Happily, we had an unschemed section of moorland; bounded on all sides by fence, wall and water, and neighboured only by ourselves. This moorland – some 140 hectares – is a mosaic of heather, grass, bracken, some scrub in the gorges of burns, small coastal cliffs and coved beaches. We thought it was far from prying eyes, until we started receiving reports of pig-sightings from the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry, and unfortunately no-one really believed our assertions that Dunlossit hosted a colony of the rare Tamworth seal.



new recruits at the moorland edge

1.3 Thirteen gilts were initially detailed for the task (one was later retrieved for maternal duties), leaving nine Large Blacks, two Tamworths and a Berkshire on pioneer duties. The project started in Spring 2007, and we had expected to have some difficulty in getting the pigs to roam as forage was scarce at that point. In the event, we had some difficulty keeping track of the pigs, as they disappeared for days on end. Eventually we decided that the absence of thirteen pigs was acceptable, whereas one absent pig would be a cause for concern. We felt there was little point leaving pig food out on the moor if the pigs were not present – too many crows would be attracted – but that the pigman would visit the feeding site daily and feed whosoever appeared.

¹ or whatever it called itself then: SEERAD, TURGID, SGRPID, SYRUP, TORPID, CYNIC or SARDONIC – the seven dwarves of bureaucracy?

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Whenever the pigs were sighted, they appeared to be in blooming health, if rather aloof. This latter point raised a concern over whether it would be possible to recapture the pigs when we needed them, but this has not (yet) proved to be an insuperable problem.

- 1.4 An early pig safari in May 2007 with a visitor from Natural England and a camera revealed good – if as yet limited – results. It was possible to track pig trails across the moorland, discovering areas of rooting amongst bracken, and very few potential problems – the worst being minor burn bank erosion where a trail crossed a water course. A later safari in August 2007 with a member of Quality Meat Scotland failed to achieve any encounter with the pigs, but identified superb clearance of steep bracken banks in the hinterland. The only real ecological complaint was the minor nature of the impact in a very large area – but we only had thirteen pigs: that is over ten hectares per pig!



heather regenerating amongst traumatised bracken

- 1.5 A further management complaint arose: the pigs kept breaking through into the lambing fields adjacent to the moorland. Upon investigation, however, it was found that the shepherd had been so concerned about the



the bracken is hammered, but the rest survives

absence of the pigs that he had scoured the moorland on an ATV bike laden with pig food until he found the wanderers, and had then led them back to the moorland gate with generous handouts of pignuts. After repeating this exercise on several occasions, the pigs thought it good to loiter at the gate ready for the next largesse, and passed the time – as bored pigs will – with a spot of limbo dancing under the fence. The shepherd was counselled about the wisdom of his actions, and another note was

entered in the Pig Guide to Management: unlike other livestock, pigs are best left to manage themselves with supervision being maintained from afar; they have little in common with cattle or sheep, and resent being herded.

- 1.6 For various pressing reasons ((a) a batch of gilts from the pig laboratory broke out on to the moorland and (b) we were running out of space elsewhere because of the incredible wetness of the winter), we increased the complement of pigs to fifty-eight at the end of April 2008. Initially there were some distressing scenes (which seriously upset the shepherd, but which the pig-handling staff were able to accept as normal pig social intercourse), but the massed ranks of pigs now seem to have established their pecking order. There has been some 'black loss' but it would be unrealistic not to expect to lose the odd pig in terrain like this. It happens all the time with sheep.
- 1.7 Now – June 2008 – it can clearly be seen from various vantage points that the pig assault on bracken is following the charted course. Great patches of

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bracken can be identified as having been 'thoroughly pigged' but the rest of the mosaic is untouched. We really need a helicopter to study the impact on the whole area, but we know from other forays that this impact is extended across the whole 140 hectares.



it needs a trained eye – or a site visit – but the arrows mark three promising patches of bracken clearance, with plenty of scope for further work in the middle and far distance



*a pig highway leading on to the next bracken slope, bypassing the heather
(note the small patch of erosion where the burn has been crossed)*

The above two pictures are results of the purest form of pig bracken management we have achieved to date. The impact is hard to fully appreciate without a site visit and a close study of the regeneration of other species where the bracken once held sway. The photograph below is a more graphic representation, although something of a cheat as it is the result of much denser

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concentrations of pigs. The area marked with the red arrow is part of the pig laboratory, subject to applications of pigs for several years. The two black-arrowed areas are the result of a high pig presence as they are feeding areas with pigs loitering for the daily visit. In reality, these are slightly over-done: they are the extreme example of what is just visible to the naked eye in the earlier photograph. Please note that there is no evidence of any but the most peripheral heather damage in these areas.



advanced and extreme examples of pig power over bracken

- 1.8 As a further observation, one of our satellite pig operations on Kintyre is reporting that after the passage of pigs the sheep are spending far lengthier periods of time on the pigged ground than before porcine intervention. The inference is that the grazing has been much improved – ie, more grass and other palatable plants, less bracken. The same pig operator has also lamented the absence of pig trails on other parts of his hill, as they are entirely beneficial when rounding up the flock.
- 1.9 A brief comparison of the use of herbicides, mechanical means and pigs is set out at Table 1. No attempt to put in costs has been made: although it would be possible to create a cost comparison for treating this particular piece of moorland in the alternative methods, it would be fairly pointless as it would not give a yardstick for any other location. This is purely a test ground to demonstrate that the extensive pig technique will work.
- 1.10 **Practical points from the experiment (and from related pig works)**
- be patient – results take time ²
 - harden your heart, to some extent – this is pig management in the raw, not the pampered life of the show pig

² key observation of CR from ten years of land management: anything which happens fast in land management is almost certainly wrong and will have unforeseen consequences. Softly, softly....

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- the pig approach is a way of life, not a one-off solution
- boundaries are important, but pigs who have everything they need are not automatically going to stray unless provoked into doing so³
- it is worth considering pig work even if the intention is to change the land-use immediately after bracken clearance (eg, planting trees) – the pigs do a great job; are largely organic, and can be eaten afterwards
- the pigs are constantly surprising us with hitherto unsuspected benefits – such as determined destruction of tree stumps left after clear-felling

1.11 Conclusion from the experiment:

- 1.11.1 This is a successful way to tackle bracken invasion on mixed moorland.
- 1.11.2 We have no scientific data to prove it works, but our own observations have convinced us that it is worth pursuing.
- 1.11.3 It is a technique which will not necessarily work in every situation (various issues will have a bearing on whether it is appropriate: eg, public access, neighbouring land use, speed of transformation required), but it is certainly worth considering alongside more conventional approaches.
- 1.11.4 The fringe benefits – the pleasure of having pigs in the landscape; the amusement (and therapy) which pigs provide, and the availability of superb pork – are an added bonus.



after the bracken....

³ the pig is a pragmatic creature and if there is forage, water, shelter and society in one place, why bother to move? (Pig Guide to Management, Chapter Four)

2 PIGS IN POLITICS

2.1 As always, any dealings with regulatory bodies are coloured by the particular individuals assigned to deal with the contact. This is our experience to date – hopefully we will have future occasion to modify this report in some quarters.

2.2 Local authority

This was our first point of contact, as all pig keepers have to be registered with the local authority. We have had enormous help and encouragement from this quarter; the local Animal Health and Welfare Officer now keeps pigs himself.

2.3 Forestry Commission (FC)

2.3.1 Once we were convinced that woodland pig operations were working well (in non-grant scheme areas), we wanted to extend operations to grant-funded woodlands which were not regenerating as fast as we hoped. We invited our Forest Officer to come across to see for himself why we thought it would have advantages; he brought the Area Conservator with him, and spent a whole day with us inspecting pig works (and eating a superb porcine lunch, of course).

2.3.2 As a result, FC became stout supporters and backers of pig land management, and wrote a discretionary payment for scarification of £80 per hectare into all our grant schemes. To our great shame we have not yet attempted to claim a single payment: enthusiasm has always led to pigs entering the woodland before the vital “before” photographs can be taken to substantiate the claim. But the point is that the FC offer is the only pig-subsidy currently available to pig farmers.

2.3.3 Since this dramatic beginning, we have had regular FC interest in our work (in fact, we have been approached to assist with a woodland grazing conference) and have also become a pilot site for the Section 9 Woodland Grazing Grant scheme in a massive 136 hectare area. Cattle, sheep and pigs are involved, and this has to be something of a landmark.

2.4 Scottish Executive / Government (SG) Rural Affairs Department

2.4.1 The response of this body has been consistently disappointing. Not only have various officers refused to allow pigs to be involved in any existing or proposed agri-environmental schemes (including woodlands), there have been attempts to create a ‘witch hunt’ which we can only assume is aimed at removing our entire pig population. We have repeatedly extended invitations to SG to come and examine the evidence; to discuss various projects with FC and so on, and these have been consistently declined (with maximum pomposity and veiled threats!).

2.4.2 It is a remarkable fact that the existence of pigs is seldom recognised in any guidance, stocking density calculation or other publication produced by this body. One can only assume that they are entirely pig-ignorant.

2.5 Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) / Natural England (NE)

- 2.5.1 The local branch of SNH has been consistently supportive of the pig work, although no joint projects have been achieved – not least because Dunlossit does not have any special status such as SSSI.
- 2.5.2 Recently we have been enormously gratified to be approached by SNH Stirling for advice on using pigs to clear bracken in a SSSI woodland area on the south shore of Lochearn.
- 2.5.3 Elsewhere, pigs are being used to rectify schemes where Black Grouse management techniques have been poorly applied, and there is increasing evidence that pigs are a very valuable tool for the finer arts of habitat management.
- 2.5.4 In Spring 2007 we were delighted to be approached by a visiting NE officer from South Cumbria, who had observed our pigs from afar and wanted to know more. Together we have spent extensive time on the hill studying pig works, and paid a reciprocal visit to South Cumbria – to find that the moors there are surprisingly similar to ours. The NE officer is now hoping to gain support from both local farmers and her hierarchy for the introduction of a pig experiment.

2.6 Farm Woodland Advisory Group (FWAG)

FWAG has arranged various study visits to our piggeries and invited us to various conferences (as part of the West Highland Grazing Project) which have generated a lot of west coast interest and several sub-projects.



2.7 Bio-diversity Action Group

The local branch has twice asked us to submit applications for grant aid, and has twice failed to offer a grant. This is extremely disappointing as we know there is a desperate need for “the pig package” – a small project designed to establish ways to make it possible for small land managers to utilise pigs for woodland and moorland management without disappearing into a welter of research.

2.8 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

RSPB has been extremely positive; visiting on several occasions; utilising photographic evidence in conferences elsewhere; arranging reciprocal visits to nature reserves, and generally being interested and encouraging. Obviously we are very anxious to ensure that our pig projects are not creating problems elsewhere, and their input on the impact on birdlife has been very helpful.

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2.9 Quality Meat Scotland (QMS)

- 2.9.1 This is another group which has been prepared to “come and see for themselves” rather than reject any proposals out of hand. We protested that the rules for the quality assurance scheme for pigs excluded us on two counts:
- outdoor pigs must be barred from natural water courses (impossible on the open moorland!)
 - all breeding stock must come from quality assured farms (impossible when dealing with rare breeds)
- 2.9.2 Although not yet published, we are advised that the pig quality assurance scheme is going to be expanded to create a third class of “extensive pigs.”

2.10 Others

We are receiving a constant stream of enquiries from other landowners (including the National Trust); land agents; conservation bodies; individuals ranging from nostalgic retired farmers to students. Naturally we are making this work for us, too and are grasping every opportunity to learn from passing experts – such as members of the Soil Association, the Slow Food Movement, botanists and naturalists – even an archaeologist has expressed interest in the use of pigs for bracken management in his line of work. We are also finding vital guidance and suggestions in antiquarian pig books,⁴ nothing that has been written since the late 1950s being of much particular assistance for this rather specialised branch of land management.



Johannes Kotzer, German pig student (right) with Dunlossit pigman and some eco-warriors of various breeds. Johannes is now anxious to import Large Blacks to Germany, something with which the British Pig Association are able and willing to help

There is a huge amount still to learn

⁴ Two in particular are amazing: “The Pioneering Pig” by Norman Blake, 1956 (donated by a former disciple); and “On The Breeding of Swine,” Robert Henderson, 1814

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 The use of pigs for land management purposes is becoming more widely accepted, and their value is becoming recognised in all but the most rigid quarters.
- 3.2 The application of pigs to bracken is a still a relatively new concept, but is becoming increasingly attractive to those who want to see incremental change in their landscape to achieve and maintain the mosaic effect so vital to biodiversity.
- 3.3 None of the problems perceived to be presented by the use of pigs have yet proved to be insuperable.
- 3.4 If the use of pigs as an effective method of bracken management is to become more widespread, land managers need:
- encouragement towards their use
 - removal of obstacles put in their way⁵
 - guidance and support on the introduction and disposal of pigs
 - recognition that the use of traditional pig breeds is valuable because:
 - it safeguards of this nation's greatest resources
 - it generates a food product which has the potential to achieve world class⁶



the pig piper plays the Middle White Rooting Song at Dunlossit's Pig Fest 2003

⁵ For example, pigs trigger a 21 day standstill when arriving on a holding (including boars, although bulls and rams are exempt from the cattle and sheep 14 day standstill..?). There are (or may be) good reasons for this, but the problems can be overcome if there is a more liberal approach to the creation of isolation units. Dunlossit has five farms, and pigs roaming over 18,500 acres; Dunlossit is registered as one holding. The fact that after several long-drawn out battles we have managed to achieve 16 isolation units seems to be an annoyance to SGRPID who cannot understand that a unit which will accommodate a pig for three weeks may be totally unsuitable for a cow....

⁶ The vast range of gourmet cured products with which the pig has in the past enchanted the world, and fine quality developments such as *confit* (using the high quality fat of the free-range traditional pig). Think Iberico, Serrano, Parma....