Living with ghosts in Glenan Wood: the role of biocultural heritage for a community-owned woodland in Argyll, Scotland

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Case Study: Glenan Wood

- Community land ownership
- 'Rainforest discourse'
- Biocultural heritage

How do participants make sense of the site's longer history of human use and occupation and how does that inform the current community woodland project?

Methods

- Historical geography (OS maps, historical accounts, environmental histories)

- Site observation / participatory (mini) ethnography

- Semi-structured interviews (n = 7) and thematic analysis
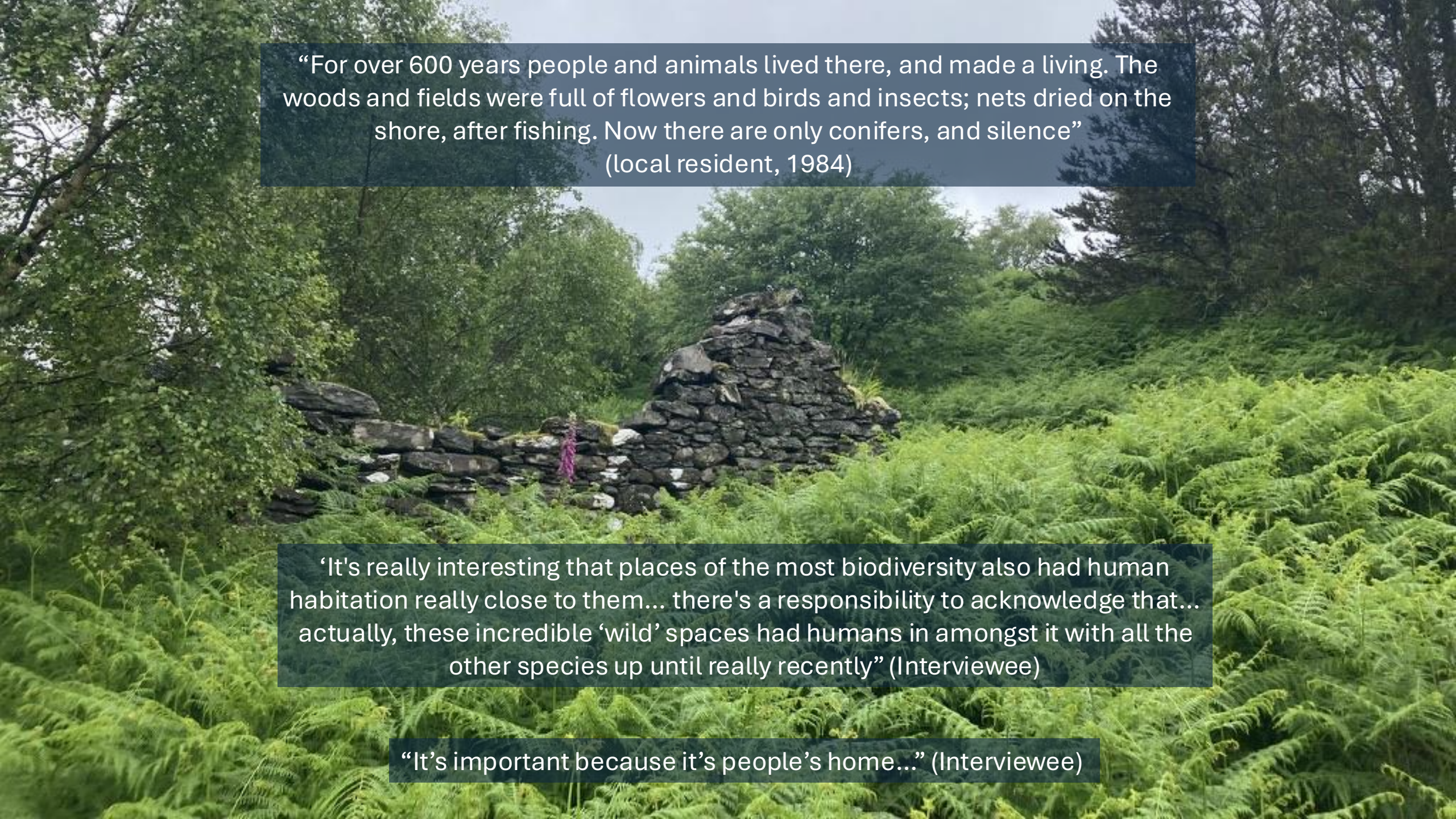
- Creative writing

Ghosts of Inhabitation and Industry

- Bracken: Inhabitation
  - Glenan farm occupied approx. 600 yrs (1309 – 1900 est.)
  - Mix of arable, pasture (cattle), wood-pasture and woodland
  - Wood meeting subsistence uses

- Lichen and Oak: Industry and Empire
  - Industrial coppicing for charcoal/tanbark (likely 1750-1850)
  - Enclosure and replanting

- Care and neglect:
  - 20th Century forestry / PAWS, conifer underplanting
  - Grassroots resistance successful, underplanting removed!

- Woods' form and persistence due to long history of subsistence *and* industrial uses, interplay of care and neglect

- Can Glenan be considered a *wild* place?

- What are the implications for conservation and rewilding? Conservation grazing? Coppicing? Continuous cover forestry?

- Abandonment or rewilding?

"For over 600 years people and animals lived there, and made a living. The woods and fields were full of flowers and birds and insects; nets dried on the shore, after fishing. Now there are only conifers, and silence"
(local resident, 1984)

'It's really interesting that places of the most biodiversity also had human habitation really close to them... there's a responsibility to acknowledge that... actually, these incredible 'wild' spaces had humans in amongst it with all the other species up until really recently" (Interviewee)

"It's important because it's people's home..." (Interviewee)

Biocultural Heritage and Belonging: Re-membering Community

- Social relations of belonging reconfigured

- 'Rainforest discourse' reorients existing concerns and relations

- Adds new (ecological, professional) knowledges and skills, connections

- BUT view as a deeply cultural landscape

- Ecological concern integrated into sense of biocultural heritage

- Heritage functions inclusively… way of forming place connection / belonging to place (i.e. learning Gaelic placenames, traditional crafts, etc.)

'We talk about 'wildness', actually it wasn't, it was where people lived. You know, this idea of Scottish wilderness is kind of [misleading]… essentially it was a living, breathing place where people lived their lives…. It's not just about preserving somewhere pretty for us to play in… actually, it was a functioning landscape, wasn't it?'

Beyond Community Engagement….

This view has political implications and is accompanied by an economic vison that is concerned with enabling *dwelling, a re-inhabiting of place*:

- Ownership and empowerment

- Local democratic accountability

- Community Wealth Building??

'If you were to look at a map of who owns this region, most of it, particularly in the middle of southwest Cowal, is owned by sort of third-party, shadowy Cayman Island investment forestry types. So, if I was to look out onto the Ardlamont Peninsula, there was a crop of trees there, which would be there for 30-40 years… there's no local employment whatsoever, none. There'll be no local access, there'll be no local input as to how it's managed and when it comes for that standing crop to be cut and taken, clear felled, there will be no income that will come this way.'