

## **Culduthel Woods**

### **A blooming community woodland**

*Heloise Le Moal, worked with us over the last four months as an intern for the Community Woodlands Association, and shares her experience in a blog note.*

Part of my internship's missions with the Community Woodlands Association was to work with Culduthel Woods to help them promote the benefits they provide to the local community and encourage people to get involved with the project. Although the group started in 2018, Culduthel is still a fairly new, as the pandemic brought the woodlands activities with volunteers to a halt for a couple of years.

However, the group have done a lot of work already. The website is up and running, the Facebook page is active and regularly updated, the management plan is about to be approved and the most dangerous trees have been cleared out.

One of the main objectives the community group wanted me to focus on was the engagement with the six schools surrounding the woodlands. I have therefore been meeting up with teachers to discuss the opportunities the woods could provide.

### ***Gaelic school***

Sine Mackenzie, a teacher at the Gaelic school leading on outdoor learning, has been using the woods over the last five years with her classes. I went out with her a few times to see how the children would interact with the forest. It was amazing to see how creative they were in the woods, building dens, and measuring them to practice calculations later in the classroom.

Sine noticed obvious benefits on children over the last few years. "Some kids that are not confident in class may be more with practical activities" she told me. "I noticed a difference [...] with one of the kids in particular who doesn't spend much time outside at all and he was really enthusiastic today and that's the first time I see that here, so I was really pleased". The children are always excited to go outside, no matter how bad the weather is!



*Figure 1: Children from the Gaelic school building a "Viking ship" in Culduthel woods*

### ***Inverness Royal Academy***

Directly adjacent to the woods is the Inverness Royal Academy. I met up with another group there, called the Bothy Project. This club is a program that supports teenagers that have been affected by adverse childhood and need a different environment to relax after a day of class. I got involved with a wee group of 11-12 years-old meeting weekly.

Chris McCormick and Jean Deakin, in charge of the project explained to me that outdoor activity is a key part of their program. They have set up an outdoor fireplace in the corner of the school playground and they would use the woodlands regularly to play games, pick the litter or learn the different tree species.

As the group was fairly small, I was inspired to set up a wee video project to show the positive benefits of them playing in the woods in a fun way, where they got to film themselves in the woods over two sessions. They really enjoyed doing it and we tried to combine education and creativity. For the last session, we organised a screening where they could watch what they had achieved, and we celebrated it with some sausages and marshmallows at their wee fire place.

⇒ **Insert video here**

### ***Constraints and opportunities***

There are numerous opportunities for school kids to enjoy the woods, however there can be some constraints making it difficult to access them.

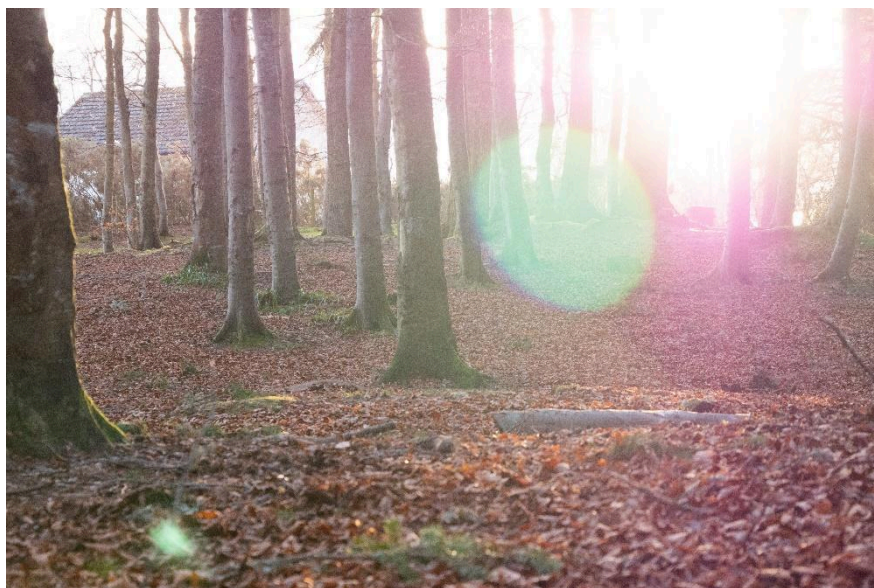
Sine told me that "litter is an issue" in the woods, mostly coming from single use packages of lunch meals getting thrown away by certain teenagers from the adjacent academy. Although the staff from the high school are actively working on it, there are a lot of educational activities to be done around that and litter picking contests (as filmed in the video) can be one of them!

The lack of staff and adults to accompany groups outside during the many covid spikes was also problematic and one way of helping would be to get local members to accompany them when needed.

The burden of paperwork to take the children outside can discourage teachers. The bothy project has set up a blanket risk assessment for the woodlands and this could be a solution to make teacher's life easier.

"It's easier than you think" says Sine. "There's been a lot of changes and restrictions, but the woods are always the same." She claims that once the children are used to the routine of safely crossing the road and play within a restricted area, it's much easier.

There is also the constraint of accessibility. Drummond school, directly North of the woods is for children with physical disabilities and many students use a wheelchair and path maintenance is key to ensure they get a chance to experience the woodlands.



At a time when Nature is declining, it is more important than ever to reconnect people and nature and educate our wee ones on the environment. Culduthel woods are keen to help anyone willing to make the most of those woods, as long as it benefits the community.

If you wish to get involved and help with the management of the woodlands or the engagement with local schools, get in touch and join one of the monthly volunteering events, and consider becoming a member and a trustee!

Heloise LM