SUNART RAINFOREST PROJECT
NATURE RECOVERY PLAN
2026-2036

www.nativewoods.co.uk

Contents

1. Introduction

The Sunart Rainforest Project Nature Recovery Plan area covers around 8,000ha of native broadleaved woodland, commercial conifer forest, and extensive open upland habitats between the north shore of Loch Sunart and the south shore of Loch Shiel, and between the villages of Strontian and Salen – as shown on Figure 1 below.

Sunart Community Company (SCC) is the lead partner in the Sunart Rainforest Project - recognising the importance of the areas unique and important natural and cultural heritage, and is working to deliver and support multiple projects that address issues such as local employment, community engagement and environmental improvement. The project brings together local landowners, crofters, community members and representatives of public agencies and other relevant organisations from across the project area and beyond. The project has received support and funding from NatureScot (via the Nature Restoration Fund and the Rainforest Restoration Fund), Scottish Forestry, Forestry and Land Scotland, Woodland Trust Scotland (WTS) and Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspectorate Division (SGRPID). The project also could not have happened without the voluntary input and in-kind support of the community steering group members, nor without the assistance of a dedicated project officer embedded within the existing community organisation.

The project has been adopted by the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest (ASR) as a '*Landscape-Scale Focus Project*', recognising that the project aspires to be an exemplar for rainforest restoration, habitat management and community engagement, and to deliver real and lasting benefits at a landscape scale.

The project area includes 10 private non-domestic landowners (including two larger farms, one commercial forest, one larger traditional estate, one hotel and five small holdings), together with 3 public-sector owners managing land on behalf of the Scottish people (Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS), Naturescot (NS) and the Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspection Department (SGRPID) plus two crofting community bodies Ardnastang Common Grazings and Anaheilt Common Grazings, some 30-50 individual crofts and domestic dwellings, and one community organisation (Sunart Community Company).

Land-ownership pattern and management objectives

As shown in Table 1 (below), around 53% of the project area is in private ownership, 30% of the project area is publicly owned and managed, 15% is under crofting tenure and 1% is now in community ownership. The majority of the land within the project area is managed for a variety of objectives including forestry, agriculture and conservation (Native Woods Co-op, 2026).

Land ownership	Total Area (ha)	% of area
Forestry & Land Scotland	1926	24%
NatureScot	573	7%
SGRPID-owned common grazings	897	11%
Other crofting areas and apportionments (SGRPID owned)	282	4%
Privately owned	4253	53%
Community owned	90	1%
	8094 ha	**100**

Table 1. Summary of land ownership across the project area (data taken from Section 3 of the Deer Management Plan 'Background info and Policies' document)

Crofting and agricultural management

Traditional agricultural and crofting management in the area is focused on the production of hill sheep and cattle, which are typically free-ranging on large areas of hill ground, being brought down on to lower ground for winter feeding and lambing or calving periods. This pattern of management still applies to some parts of the project area, but sheep numbers have fallen dramatically as compared to previous highs in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the two larger farms are increasingly focused on cattle-grazing with a strong emphasis on conservation grazing and integrating cattle raising with woodland management and native woodland expansion. Many of the crofts and small-holdings are increasingly focused on small-scale food production, conservation management and croft diversification activities such as tourist accommodation.

Forestry, woodland and conservation management

The project area has a long history of protecting and actively managing native woodlands, and of integrating livestock grazing with timber, charcoal and tanbark production. It has also long been engaged with the process of widespread commercial afforestation with non-native tree species, designed to reduce the UK's reliance on imported timber, with thousands of hectares of such plantations having been largely established in the area by the Forestry Commission in the second half of the twentieth century – providing valued local jobs, houses and livelihoods locally, and making a very significant contribution to the economy and viability of a remote rural area.

Deer Management

The project area currently forms the 'west subgroup' of the East Loch Shiel Deer Management Group (https://elochsheildmg.deer-management.co.uk/). In terms of owner objectives, sporting deer management is thought to be a key priority on just one of the privately-owned management units covering around 10% of the project area. However several other publicly-owned management units continue to generate income through short-term sporting leases (covering around another 20% of the project area) - these being currently under review. SGRPID, as landlord, manages deer across the Ardnastang and Anaheilt common grazings and also holds sporting leases across some 1500 ha of the privately-owned ground, and therefore has effective control over deer management in these areas; whilst FLS has been letting the sporting rights to the remote and inaccessible Achanellan forest on Loch Shiel side in recent years. In total then, public sector agencies control deer management over approximately 64% of the project area.

One of the outcomes of the 25-26 Nature Restoration Fund project was the drafting of a new dedicated draft Deer Management Plan to cover the project area, details of which can be found on the SCC website (https://sunartcommunitycompany.co.uk/sunart-rainforest/sunart-rainforest-deer-management-plan). One of the recommendations of this plan is that the Deer Management Plan area is extended to the north-east of the current Sunart Rainforest Project area, to take in the extensive publicly-owned forest land at Glen Hurich and Drimnatorran, as well as the Ariundle Oakwood National Nature Reserve, furthering increasing the proportion of land managed both for forestry and for native woodland conservation, and aligning better with existing north-south deer fences and east-west management objectives.

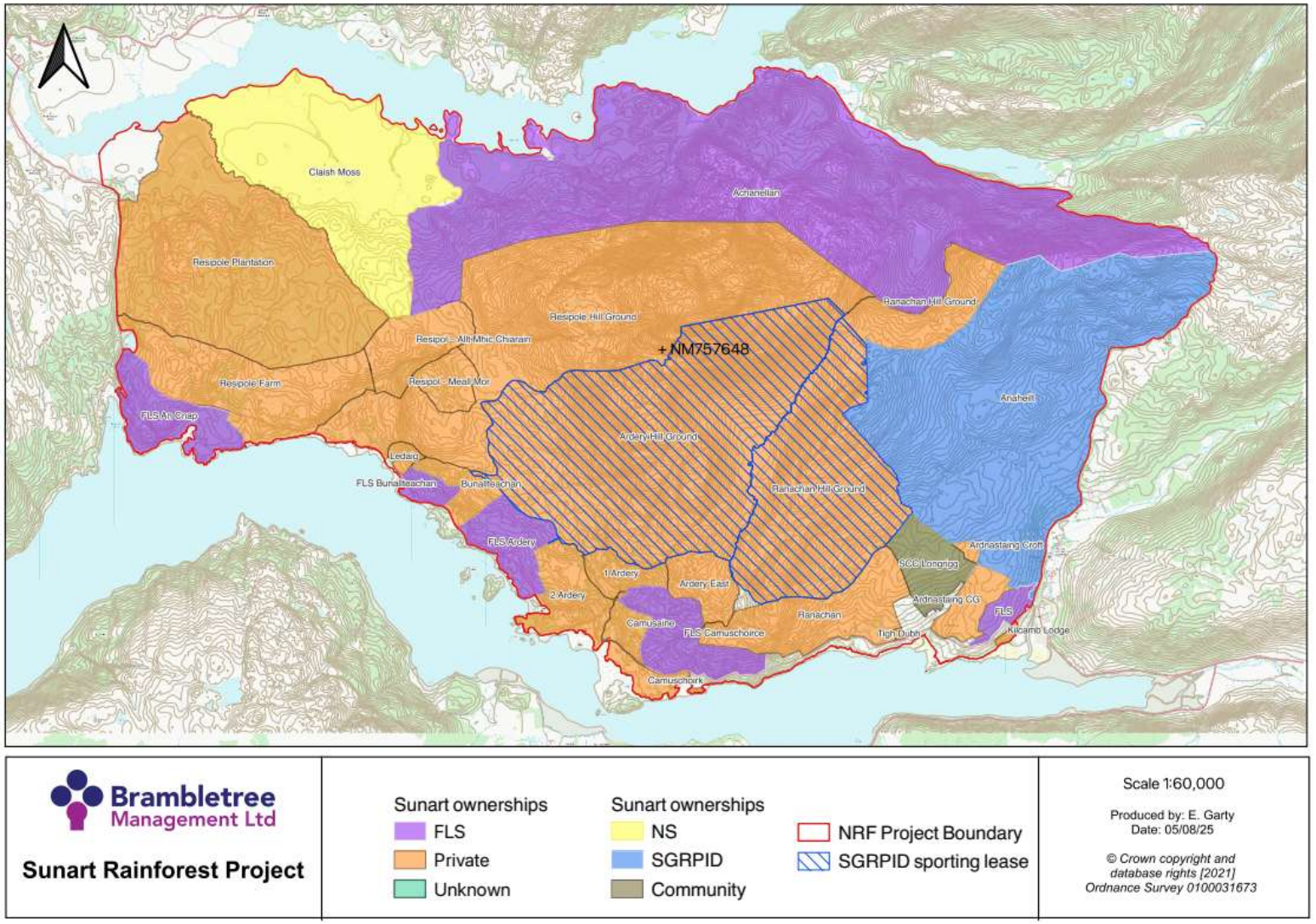


Figure 1 Map of the North Sunart Rainforest Project boundary and management units

2. Developing a vision for nature recovery across the Sunart Rainforest Project area

In this context landscape-scale nature-restoration means the **active restoration of woodland, peatland, river and other habitats**, across multiple land-holdings and over long periods of time (NatureScot, 2025) with the following main aims:

- To restore nature and enhance biodiversity;
- To mitigate climate change by reducing carbon emissions; and
- To adapt to climate change by increasing the resilience of our catchments to reduce flood risk and protect water supplies

The Nature Recovery Plan aims to outline a landscape-scale approach to the management, protection and care of the full range of valuable semi-natural habitats present within the project area (including a number of internationally important protected sites), and to improve the resilience of these habitats in the context of Scottish Government policies designed to address the twin threats of the nature and climate emergency, alongside policies for community empowerment and community wealth building.

Examples of landscape-scale nature recovery projects with a rainforest focus include Saving Morvern's Rainforest (https://savingscotlandsrainforest.org.uk/in-delivery/saving-morverns-rainforest), Regenerating Craignish Rainforest (https://savingscotlandsrainforest.org.uk/in-development/craignish), Loch Lomond Rainforest Project (https://savingscotlandsrainforest.org.uk/in-development/llattnp) and the Knapdale Restoration Project (https://savingscotlandsrainforest.org.uk/in-delivery/knapdale-landscape-scale-restoration-project) amongst others.

Given the importance of Scotland's rainforests and peatland habitats in relation to both the nature and climate emergencies these will be given a particular focus within this plan, with the aim of ensuring that a large part of the project area – and these habitats in particular - are effectively managed in a way that improves their condition in relation to biodiversity and climate change impacts, and which is consistent with the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the new Natural Environment (Scotland) Act. A key part of this will be to review the available information on the current condition of the notified/designated features within the Sunart and Loch Shiel SAC and SSSI boundaries in the project area, and to provide recommendations on measures which can be taken by landowners and managers within the project area to ensure that key pressures upon these features are reduced in the short to medium term for these features.

*2.1 Condition of designated sites and key pressures on **woodland** habitats*

The project area is thought to include thirteen notified or designated terrestrial features of the Sunart SAC and SSSI, as well as three notified terrestrial features of the Loch Shiel SSSI as shown in Table 2 below.

The extent and distribution of the woodland habitat features is shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 below, using the data collected as part of the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (NWSS) project - which gives a snapshot of the extent and condition of native woodland habitats from the period 2007-2013.

For further detail on the designations refer also to the documentation in Appendices 3 - 6 (Sunart and Loch Shiel SSSI Citation and Site Management Statements, Naturescot), and for further information on the definitions of the condition assessments of features and sites see https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/protected-areas/site-condition-monitoring/assessment-condition. Further details of the definition of 'Favourable Condition' in the specific context of the Sunart Oakwoods can also be found in Section 4 of the report by Peterken and Worrell (2001), and an outline of the various targets for Common Standards Monitoring of woodland features can be found in Headley (2020).

Sunart	**Designation**		
Qualifying features	**Special Area of Conservation**	**Site of Special Scientific Interest**	**Habitat and NVC types thought to occur within the project area**
Upland oak woodland		✓	Upland Oakwood and Upland Birchwood, plus Wet Woodland and Upland Mixed Ashwood BAP Priority Habitats in mosaic: W17, W11 (with W4, W7, W9)
Old sessile oak wood with holly and Blechnum ferns	✓	✓	Upland Oakwood and Upland Birchwood BAP Priority Habitats: W11, W17 (W4).
Mixed broadleaved woodland of slopes, screes and ravines.	✓		Upland Mixed Ashwood BAP Priority Habitats : W9, W7c
Northern Atlantic wet heaths with cross-leaved heath	✓		Wet heath: M15
European dry heaths	✓		Dry heath: H10, H12
Bryophyte assemblage		✓	
Lichen assemblage		✓	
Upland assemblage		✓	Wet heath (M15), dry heath (H10, H12), rock outcrops, acid grassland, base-rich flushes (M10-M11), acid

Sunart	Designation		
Qualifying features	**Special Area of Conservation**	**Site of Special Scientific Interest**	**Habitat and NVC types thought to occur within the project area**
			flushes (M6), blanket bog (M17, M1), calcicolous grassland (CG10-11) and rock outcrops.
Vascular plant assemblage		✓	
Dragonfly assemblage		✓	
Otter (*Lutra lutra*)	✓	✓	
Chequered Skipper (*Carterocephalus palaemon*)		✓	
Moths		✓	

Table 2: Designations and qualifying features for Sunart SSSI and SAC which are thought to occur within the Sunart Rainforest Project boundary (terrestrial features only)

Map of rainforest extent and composition within the SSSI boundary for Sunart Rainforest Project (Based on NWSS data from around 2010)

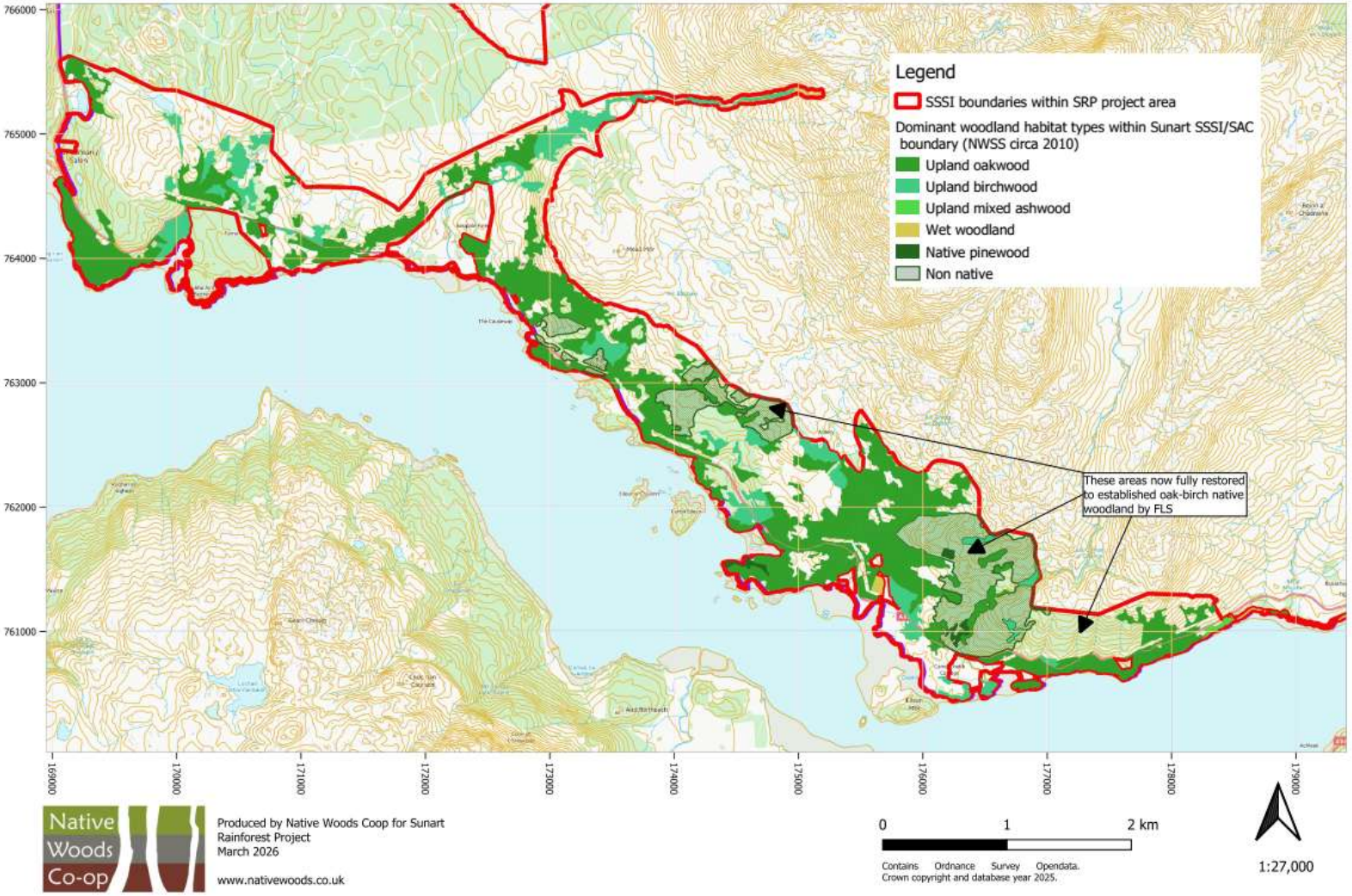


Figure 2: Map of rainforest extent and composition within Sunart SSSI/SAC boundary within project area (See also Appendix 1)

From Figure 2 above and using the NWSS GIS dataset, we can calculate the proportion of the overall Sunart SSSI which is located within the Sunart Rainforest Project area. This analysis is outlined in Table 3 below indicating that overall area of the SSSI which lies within the project area is 947.9 ha, representing just over 17% of the area of the whole SSSI.

We can also further analyse the distribution and composition of the notified woodland features of the Sunart SSSI and SAC across the Sunart Rainforest Project area, using the NWSS data (which is now 10 or more years out of date). From this we can see that there were nearly 600 ha of NWSS polygons surveyed within the SSSI boundary within the project boundary. Of these, around 100 ha were 'internal open land habitats' (i.e. they were surrounded entirely by mapped woodland habitats) and a review of current aerial photos indicates that many of these have infilled with native woodland - for example the eastern half of the FLS Camaschoirk block - which was recently cleared PAWS at time of NWSS; in addition the NWSS dataset recorded 15 polygons identified as non-native PAWS covering 133 ha, and review of aerial photos and local knowledge confirms that at least 84 ha of these polygons have been cleared of conifers and restored to native woodland habitats in the intervening decade or more since the NWSS mapping.

Designated Site Name	Site Type	Total Area of designated site within Sunart Rainforest Project area (ha)	% of whole Sunart SSSI (5540.16 ha) within project area	% of overall Sunart SSSI woodland features (1708.4 ha) located within project area
Sunart	SSSI and SAC	947.9 ha	17.1 %	Approximately 30% (based on ~500 ha of native woodland and PAWS mapped by NWSS in around 2010 within SSSI boundary within project area)

Table 3: Area and proportion of the wider designated site falling within the Sunart Rainforest Project area

NWSS Dominant habitat type	*Number of polygons within Sunart SSSI boundary within project area*	*Area (ha)*	*As a percentage*
Native Pinewood	*3*	*3.2*	*0.6 %*
Upland Birchwood	*42*	*70.3*	*14.2 %*
Upland Mixed Ashwood	*1*	*1.2*	*0.2 %*
Upland Oakwood	*64*	*285.4*	*57.7%*
Wet Woodland	*4*	*1.8*	*0.4%*
Non-native (PAWS)	*15*	*133.0*	*26.9%*
Total		*494.9*	

Table 4: Dominant Native woodland BAP Priority Habitat types occurring within the Sunart SSSI/SAC within the project area, as mapped by NWSS

Loch Shiel	**Designation**	
Qualifying features	**Site of Special Scientific Interest**	**Habitat and NVC types thought to occur within the project area**
Upland oak woodland	✓	Upland Oakwood and Upland Birchwood, plus Wet Woodland and Upland Mixed Ashwood BAP Priority Habitats in mosaic: W17, W11 (with W4, W7, W9)
Bryophyte assemblage	✓	
Chequered Skipper (*Carterocephalus palaemon*)	✓	

Table 5: Designations and qualifying features for Loch Shiel SSSI which are thought to occur within the Sunart Rainforest Project boundary (terrestrial features only)

From Figure 3 below and using the SSSI boundary dataset, we can calculate the proportion of the overall Loch Shiel SSSI which is located within the Sunart Rainforest Project area. This analysis is outlined in Table 3 below, indicating that overall area of the SSSI which lies within the project area is 58.3 ha, representing just under 2% of the area of the whole SSSI (which includes the whole of the Loch Shiel waterbody).

Designated Site Name	Site Type	Total Area of designated site within Sunart Rainforest Project area (ha)	% of whole Loch Shiel SSSI (3355.68 ha) within project area	% of overall Loch Shiel SSSI woodland features located within project area
Loch Shiel	SSSI	58.3 ha	1.7 %	Less than 1% (based on ~14 ha of native woodland mapped by NWSS in around 2010 within SSSI boundary within project area)

Table 6: Area and proportion of the Loch Shiel designated site falling within the Sunart Rainforest Project area

NWSS Dominant habitat type	*Number of polygons within Sunart SSSI boundary within project area*	*Area (ha)*	*As a percentage*
Upland Birchwood	*8*	*5.56*	*41%*
Wet Woodland	*1*	*0.35*	*3%*
Upland Oakwood	*2*	*7.07*	*52%%*
Non-native (PAWS)	*1*	*0.59*	*4%*
Total		*13.58*	

Table 7: Dominant Native woodland BAP Priority Habitat types occurring within the Loch Shiel SSSI within the project area, as mapped by NWSS

Map of rainforest extent and composition within the Loch Shiel SSSI boundary for Sunart Rainforest Project (Based on NWSS data from around 2010)

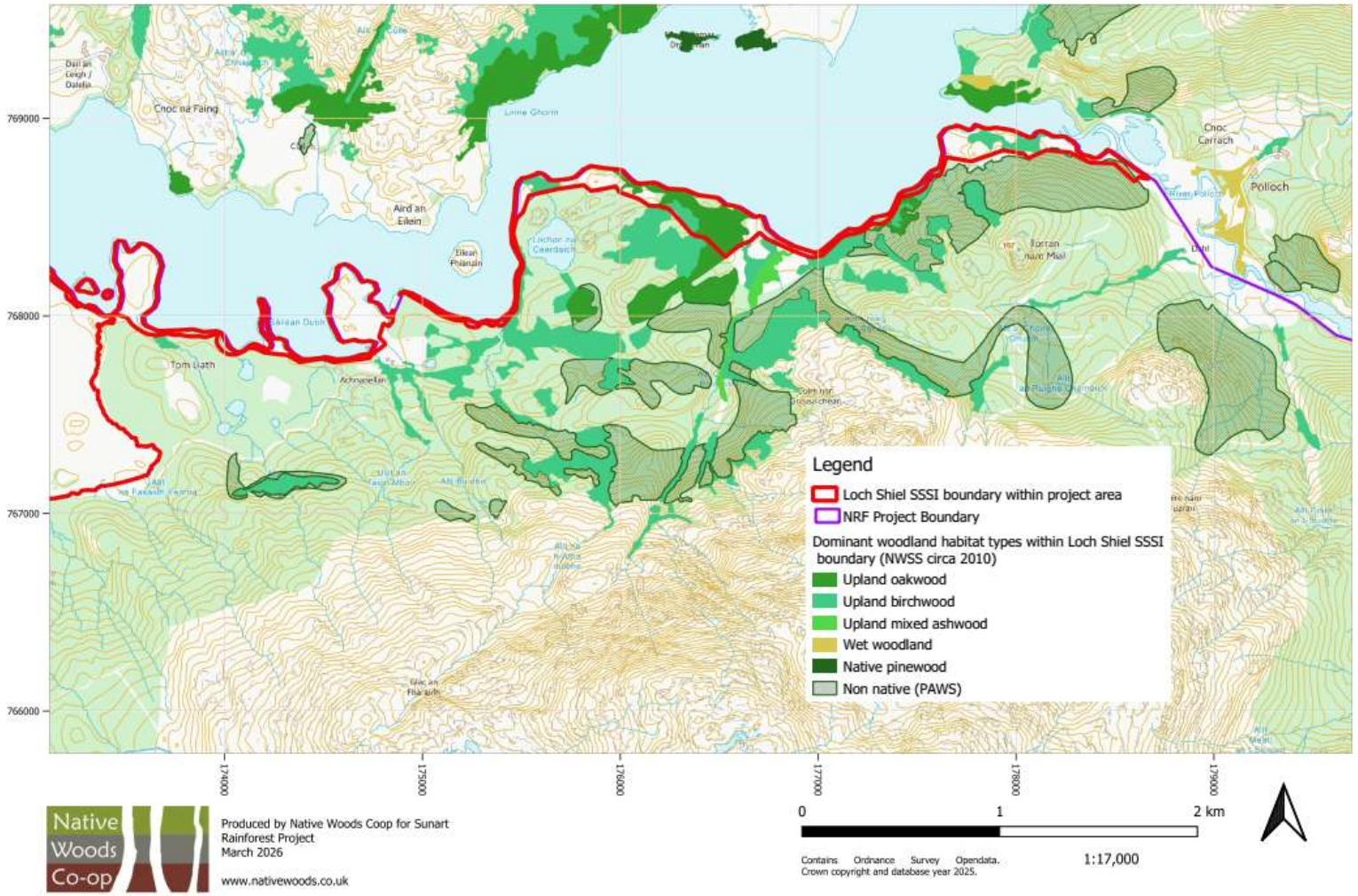


Figure 3: Map of rainforest extent and composition within Loch Shiel SSSI boundary within project area (See also Appendix 2)

Within Sunart SAC and SSSI, and the Loch Shiel SSSI sites we find the following **woodland or woodland related features within the project area which are currently in Favourable Condition:** Breeding bird assemblage, Vascular plant assemblage, Native pinewood, Moths, Otters, Chequered Skipper.

By contrast we find that the following **woodland and woodland related features within the project area are currently in Unfavourable Condition:** Western acidic oak woodland, Mixed woodland on base rich soils, Alder woodland on floodplains, Bryophyte assemblage and Lichen assemblage.

The reasons given for these condition assessments and the date of monitoring are shown in Table 4 below:

Feature description	**SSSI/ SAC**	**SCM Condition**	**Date assessed**	**Pressures noted**
Upland oak woodland (Sunart)	SSSI	Unfavourable No change	17/11/2009	
Upland oak woodland (Loch Shiel)	SSSI	Unfavourable declining	July 2019	Invasive species Over grazing • Cattle • Deer
Western acidic oak woodland (Sunart)	SAC	Unfavourable No change	17/06/2014	Invasive species • Rhododendron Over grazing • Deer • Goats
Mixed woodland on base-rich soils (Sunart)	SAC	Unfavourable Declining	17/06/2014	Invasive species Exotic conifers Rhododendron Over grazing
Bryophyte assemblage (Sunart)	SSSI	Unfavourable No change	28/9/2005	
Bryophyte assemblage (Loch Shiel)	SSSI	Unfavourable declining	25 March 2022	Invasive species Over grazing Trampling
Lichen assemblage (Sunart)	SSSI	Unfavourable No change	24/11/2010	
Vascular plant assemblage (Sunart)	SSSI	Favourable Recovered	29/8/2011	

Feature description	SSSI/ SAC	SCM Condition	Date assessed	Pressures noted
Chequered Skipper (Sunart)	SSSI	Favourable Maintained	23/7/2014	
Otter (Sunart)	SSSI/ SAC	Favourable Maintained	4/10/2011	

Table 8: Notified woodland and woodland-related features occurring within the Sunart Rainforest Project area and their overall site-wide condition

Additional detailed information on the structure, composition and condition of these rainforest remnants in Sunart was provided in a suite of Woodland Profile Survey reports (e.g. SNH Research Report 1182) produced by Alistair Headley for the East Loch Shiel, Morvern and Ardnamurchan Deer Management Groups (Headley, 2020). These reports focused specifically on the upland oakwood feature and the non-vascular plant features (lichens and bryophytes) of the Sunart SSSI/SAC, and it includes data collected on the life-classes of each of the main tree species at 84 randomly located plots in the East Loch Shiel group area, as well as an assessment of the herbivore impacts on the seedlings and saplings of these tree species. The main findings of the report were that '*The sessile oak population has an unsustainable population structure as the sapling generations are virtually absent or at exceedingly low density*' and also that rowan, holly and hazel populations were dominated by small seedlings with little recruitment to larger size-classes, whilst '*the downy birch population appears to be viable as there are higher densities of seedlings and small and large saplings than mature trees*'. On the basis of the data collected, the report concludes that at least two of the eight standard site condition monitoring targets for woodland features can NOT be considered to be met, and that 'in the long term the woodland is most likely to change from one dominated by large over-mature sessile oak trees to one dominated by downy birch'. Browsing impacts were noted on 68-72% of tree seedlings recorded overall, with 100% of willow, 99% of holly, 97% of hazel, 70% of oak, 65-70% of rowan and 62-67% of birch seedlings showing browsing impacts. On the basis of this and the other two woodland profile surveys covering the Sunart SSSI woodland and lower plant notified features in 2019-20, it was Naturescot's opinion that the condition of these features remained unchanged from the previous full SCM results shown in Table 8 above.

From the above information on the condition of key biodiversity features within the project area, we can identify the following broad pressures on rainforest and native woodland habitats more widely, and we can begin to set area-wide objectives for active management of these pressures both at a landscape-scale, and at the scale of individual management units:

- Deer and livestock browsing impacts on seedlings and saplings of key palatable tree species such as oak, hazel and rowan
- Regeneration of invasive non-native plant species – and in particular *Rhododendron ponticum* and non-native commercial conifer species such as Sitka spruce, Western Hemlock and Lodgepole pine
- Twentieth century conifer afforestation on formerly ancient woodland sites (PAWS)

*2.2 Condition of designated sites and key pressures on **non-woodland** habitats*

Within Sunart, Loch Shiel and Claish and Kentra Moss SSSI and SAC designated sites we find the following **SSSI or SAC non-woodland features within the project area which are currently in Favourable Condition:** Dragonfly assemblage, Breeding bird assemblage, Vascular plant assemblage, Blanket bog, Moths, Otters, Golden Eagle, and Chequered Skipper.

By contrast we find that the following **SSSI or SAC non-woodland features within the project area are currently in Unfavourable Condition:** Upland assemblage, Wet heath, Dry heath, and Black Throated Diver.

The reasons given for these condition assessments and the date of monitoring are shown in Table 9 below:

Feature description	**SSSI/ SAC**	**SCM Condition**	**Date assessed**	**Notes**
Dry heaths (Sunart)	SAC	Unfavourable No change	17/06/2014	Invasive species • Bracken Over grazing • Deer • Sheep Under grazing
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath (Sunart)	SAC	Unfavourable No change	17/06/2014	Invasive species • Bracken Over grazing • Cattle • Deer • Sheep
Upland assemblage (Sunart)	SSSI	Unfavourable No change	17/06/2014	
Blanket bog (Claish and Kentra Mosses)	SAC	Favourable Maintained		Burning Invasive species Over grazing

Feature description	SSSI/ SAC	SCM Condition	Date assessed	Notes
Depressions on peat substrates (Claish and Kentra Mosses)	SAC	Favourable Maintained		Invasive species Over grazing Trampling
Chequered Skipper (Sunart)	SSSI	Favourable Maintained	23/7/2014	
Otter (Sunart)	SSSI/ SAC	Favourable Maintained	4/10/2011	
Dragonfly assemblage (Sunart)	SSSI	Favourable Maintained	6/8/2013	

Table 9: Notified open habitat features occurring within the Sunart Rainforest Project area and their overall site-wide condition

From the above information on the condition of key non-woodland biodiversity features within the project area, we can identify the following broad pressures on open habitats and non-woodland habitats more widely, and we can begin to set area-wide objectives for active management of these pressures at both a landscape-scale and at the scale of individual management units.

- Deer and livestock browsing, grazing and trampling impacts – ***high impacts*** leading to erosion of peatland and heathland habitats and resulting CO_2 emissions, ***low impacts*** possibly leading to colonisation of dry heath habitats by native and non-native tree species.
- Invasive native plant species – spread of bracken as a result of reduced grazing pressure
- Invasive non-native plant species – *Rhododendron ponticum* and non-native conifers such as Sitka, Lodgepole and Western Hemlock
- Burning – uncontrolled wildfire impacts in grassland and shrub fuels damaging peat-forming vegetation such as wet heaths and blanket bogs, as well as damage to young woodlands and a risk to other property and infrastructure
- Twentieth century conifer afforestation on peatland habitats and deep peats – notable in the western half of the FLS Achanellan block, probably leading to net loss of carbon storage in peat soils and to negative impacts on peatland biodiversity in an area adjacent to a designated peatland of international importance (Claish Moss).

3. Key priorities for landscape-scale nature recovery action 2026-2036 and beyond

3.1 Protect, restore and expand native woodland habitats

Objective 1 a

Reduce herbivore impacts to 'Low' across the majority of native woodland habitats, whilst supporting the use of seasonal or rotational livestock grazing in some woodland areas to manage and improve habitat conditions for key features of the SSSI and SAC sites.

Preliminary WHIA carried out for 69 stops across private woodland ownerships within the Sunart SSSI in 2024 and 2025 as part of the FGS co-operation project and the NRF projects.

Development of draft Deer Management Plan for project area (delivered as part of the Rainforest Restoration Funding 2025-26)

Establishment of a new Deer Management Group for the Sunart Rainforest Project Area (under development in 2025-26)

Development and operation of deer culling 'bounty scheme' (delivered as part of the Rainforest Restoration Funding 2025-26, with a 400% increase in hind cull levels compared with previous 5 years average cull, up to 203 from 48 hinds).

Future deer cull bounty scheme to be developed, funded and delivered 2026-27 and beyond.

Support owners in development of woodland grazing management plans to align with owner objectives including native woodland expansion and with managing, maintaining and expanding habitat suitability for key species – especially invertebrates - such as Chequered Skipper and Pearl Bordered Fritillary butterflies.

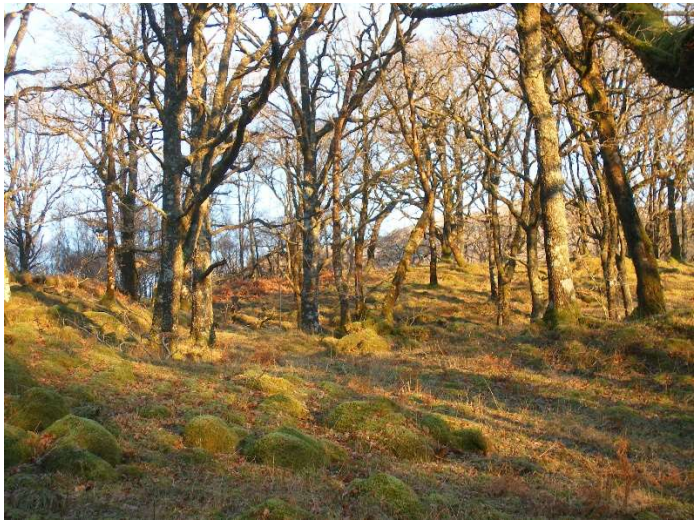

Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary

Objective 1 b
Continued removal of mature non-native conifers from PAWS sites

FLS scheduled harvesting and clearance of conifers from Camsachoirk, Ardery, Bunallteachain and An Cnap by 2030, pending challenges with infrastructure constraints

Conifer harvesting and clearance of PAWS areas in FLS Achanellan - depending upon development of road and infrastructure westwards from Polloch, as outlined in current East Loch Shiel Land Management Plan which is currently under public consultation (probably over next 10-15 years).

Conversion of the majority of the FLS Achanellan forest block to native woodland on completion of harvesting of the first rotation of non-native conifers (probably over next 10-15 years). According to our estimates *this is likely to represent the restoration of ~300 to 430 ha of PAWS, and the conversion of an additional c. 600 ha of commercial conifers to native woodland habitats.*



Oak high forest at Ardery

Objective 1 c
Remove non-native conifer regeneration from native woodland habitats

FLS have carried out a second phase of non-native conifer regeneration removal from restored PAWS areas on Sunart side in 2025-26.

Preliminary mapping of invasive conifer regeneration and rhododendron across Sunart SSSI woodlands as part of the 2024 FGS Cooperation Project.

Clearance of non-native conifers from Ardery East, 2 Ardery and Camasaine woodlands alongside rhododendron removal in 25-26 (~87 ha gross area covered)

Private owners to survey and map non-native conifers within native woodland habitats and adjacent open habitats 2026-27, and to remove these within 3 years – pending funding availability (2026-2029)

Sitka spruce regeneration under oakwood canopy at Ardery

Objective 1 d
Remove Rhododendron and other invasive non-native plant species from native woodland habitats

Preliminary survey of INNS across private owners within Sunart SSSI completed in 24-25 as part of the FGS co-operation project. Forming basis for 'Rainforest Fund' application in 2025-26.

Clearance of rhododendron from a number of landholdings completed under the 2025-26 Rainforest Restoration Project (approximately 90% of the net area mapped has been completed or is in progress) including Resipole Farm, Bunallteachain, 2 Ardery, Ardery East, Camasaine, Camaschoirk, Kilcamb Hotel, Ardnastang Common Grazings and Ranachan croft.

Drone and ground survey of rhododendron across private owners within Sunart SSSI partially completed in 2025-26; ongoing and completion in 2026-27.

Additional future survey and removal likely to be required at Salen village, Ledaig, Bunallteachain (East).

FLS rhododendron removal from the Sunart forest blocks ongoing, with further survey and control work scheduled in 2026-27.

Scattered rhododendron in oak woodland at Ardery

Objective 1 e

Seek to expand the area of native woodland habitats with a particular focus on increasing connectivity between woodland habitats, and enabling woodland expansion above the existing upper woodland edge.

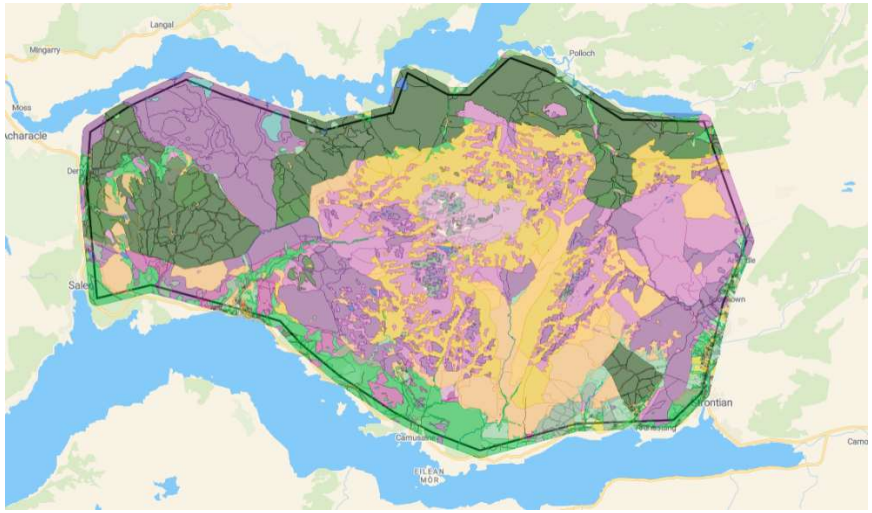
Outline map of potential areas for woodland expansion produced for the FGS co-operation project (2024-25) identified at least 475 ha suitable for a mixture of planting and natural regeneration amongst private sector woodland owners within or adjacent to Sunart SSSI/SAC.

Detailed review of NVC vegetation types and habitat suitability for native woodland creation and woodland expansion was carried out across 270 hectares for Ranachan (2025-26). This indicated that 79 ha of ground was likely to be suitable for natural regeneration from existing scattered native trees (based on a 50m buffer around these trees), and that at least 102 ha of the site was potentially suitable for woodland creation by planting – avoiding any constraints of deep peat or botanically rich GWDTEs. In addition a significant proportion of the 'blanket bog-wet heath mosaic' habitats, totalling 135 ha, was also likely to be suitable for tree planting pending further peat depth survey and mapping.

Review of the Naturescot Natural Capital Tool for the overall Sunart Rainforest Project area suggests that there may be considerably more potentially-suitable habitat for native woodland expansion – especially onto grassland and wet heath habitats in the upper Allt Camas a Choirce, around the Longrigg plantation and above the eastern and western ends of the FLS Achanellan block.

Additional detailed survey of vegetation and habitat suitability for native woodland creation to be carried out where this aligns with owner objectives.

Native woodland expansion occurring around core oakwood habitats at Ranachan



Baseline habitats map from the Natural Capital Tool developed by Naturescot

Key: purple=bog, mauve=heath, yellow=grassland, green=woodland, pale green=marshy grassland/unknown. https://natcaptool.nature.scot

3.2 Protect and restore open semi-natural habitats

Objective 2 a
Identify and map key open semi-natural habitats across the project area
For example:
Blanket bog
Wet and dry heaths
Vascular plant assemblages
Grasslands and haymeadow habitats
Montane habitats

Objective 2 b
Develop grazing prescriptions and livestock management regimes designed to maintain and enhance the condition and extent of key open habitats, and the species associated with these habitats, across the project area

Grazing plans to maintain glades and open areas for butterflies and dragonflies within native woodlands.
Grazing plans to integrate cattle and livestock within mature and expanding native woodland habitats, and to help to reduce the spread of bracken in key notified open habitats

Objective 2 c
Identify areas of drained, actively eroding or otherwise damaged peatland across the project area with a view to carrying out peatland restoration and reversing carbon emissions resulting from land-use.

Peatland restoration on open ground – for example ground truth and review locally the peatland erosion mapping produced recently by Macfarlane et al (2023), which indicates some significant areas of eroding peatland on high ground in various parts of the project area.
Peatland restoration within afforested areas (especially Achanellan Forest) i.e. forest-to-bog.
Engage with owners, managers, grazing committees and local Peatland Action project officers.

3.3 Protect and restore coastal habitats

Key coastal habitats on the southern side of the project area include rocky shorelines, shingle beaches, seagrass habitats and saltmarsh habitats, all of which are particularly valuable for otter (*Lutra lutra*) and for wading birds.

Threats to these habitats and features include sea-level rise and coastal erosion resulting from climate change and the spread of non-native species such as *Rhododendron ponticum* and Sitka spruce.

Objective 3 a
Identify and map key coastal habitats across the project area

Objective 3 b
Develop management guidance to ensure protection and resilience of important coastal habitats across the project area

Coastal and rainforest habitats at Ardery

3.4 Protect and restore freshwater habitats

The project area includes important freshwater habitats of several types and at a variety of scales. Loch Shiel itself forms the northern boundary of the site and is one of the UK's largest and most important freshwater habitats, notified for divers and fisheries.

- There are numerous burns and smaller watercourses which are generally in good semi-natural condition, some of which - such as the Allt Mhic Chiaran at Resipole, are known to be internationally important refugia for bryophytes and lower plants.
- There are also some larger river habitats including the lower reaches of the Strontian river and the Polloch river.
- There are a considerable number of small unnamed freshwater lochans on the hill ground of Beinn Resipol and Beinn an Albannaich, a number of lochans and bog pools in the low ground of Achanellan forest (including Loch na Ceardaich and five others)
- The bog pool complexes of Claish Moss (SSSI/SAC) and of other areas of blanket bog across the site are also important freshwater habitats themselves

Oligotrophic lochan and commercial forestry at Resipole

Objective 4 a
Identify and map key freshwater habitats across the project area

Objective 4 b
Develop management guidance to ensure protection and resilience of important freshwater habitats across the project area

4. Community engagement and partnership working for nature recovery in Sunart

The project area has a long and enduring history of active co-operation, partnership working and community engagement in rainforest restoration - most notably through the pioneering work of the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative in the period 1998 – 2010. There is widespread community support to build upon that original rainforest restoration work and to work together to manage herbivore impacts and the invasive plant species which are currently negatively impacting the local rainforest habitats, much of which is recognised for its national and international importance for biodiversity.

In the context of landscape-scale rainforest restoration in Scotland, the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest has produced recent guidance on community benefits (Lawrence and Paterson, 2023). The report recommends that community benefits should follow these principles:

- be intentional, deliberate and additional to the more general public benefits of rainforest restoration;
- be delivered to and with the community of people who live and work in the rainforest restoration project landscape;
- be an integral part of the project;
- be planned and agreed with the local community and based on an engagement process to understand local needs and priorities;
- be integrated and where possible, delivered with established constituted community groups, aligned with local strategic and development plans, and based on written agreements and legal advice;
- be clear and identifiable, monitored and evaluated, with regular public reporting on progress.

Oak thinning and milling trials carried out as part of the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative (in around 2007)

Objective 5 a
Develop community engagement programme related to nature recovery involving local schools, voluntary groups and existing community bodies

Objective 5 b
Continue to develop and maintain partnership working with key organisations such as Naturescot, Forestry and Land Scotland, SGRPID, Common Grazing Committees and the crofting community, Woodland Trust, RSPB, East Loch Shiel Deer Management Group and others

Objective 5 c
Explore opportunities to extend the project area westwards along the north side of Loch Sunart to include additional areas of threatened rainforest habitat.

Objective 5 d
Explore opportunities to improve hill/forest access routes – compatible with land management and recreation objectives

Objective 5 e
Explore scope for improved local facilities for venison processing, adding value and marketing of local venison

Objective 5 f
Create additional opportunities for community members to become involved in deer management and woodland management

Objective 5 g
Develop additional opportunities for new entrants to crofting, woodland management and food production (Woodland crofts – Woodlots – Housing)

Objective 5 e
Deliver funded local land-based training courses

References

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Appendices and maps

Appendix 1: Woodland Habitat Type and Extent within Sunart SSSI
Appendix 2: Woodland Habitat Type and Extent within Loch Shiel SSSI
Appendix 3: SSSI Citation for Sunart
Appendix 4: Site Management Statement for Sunart SSSI
Appendix 5: SSSI Citation for Loch Shiel
Appendix 6: Site Management Statement for Loch Shiel SSSI