In Torridon we trust

In the fifty years of its stewardship The National Trust for Scotland has secured the wild heart of this Wester Ross landscape, warding off wind farms and successfully managing a growing number of visitors while also nurturing flora and fauna, says ***Polly Pullar***

Torridon, and the surrounding area of Wester Ross has some of the most unsurpassed scenery in the British Isles. Little wonder that for generations it has been a magnet for walkers, mountaineers and those with a passion for all that represents truly wild Scotland.

It was here too on Beinn Eighe that the UK's first National Nature Reserve was made in 1951, recognised for its unique habitats, flora and fauna, and the fragile aging Caledonian pine forest on its northern slopes overlooking Loch Maree. The area is rife with important designations including Special Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSI's) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's).

The combination of certain nutrient deficiencies and a maritime climate provide a perfect environment for a host of rare bryophytes, mosses, liverworts and lichens. In the steep burn flanks, safe from grazing animals, scrub woodland thrives, and includes prostrate juniper, willow, rowan, hazel, birch and oak.

I first visited Torridon when I was nine years old. My burgeoning love for wild places had been forged in Ardnamurchan. Sent away to a boarding school I hated in Perthshire, I befriended a girl with similar interests whose parents owned the Loch Torridon Hotel. She invited me to stay, and all I remember of that inaugural foray as we drove down Glen Torridon was the grandeur and austerity of the great towering rocky bastions that engulfed us, their vertiginous summits swathed in brooding grey cloud. Everything around me seemed on another scale altogether. On the loch shore next morning, I stood on sheep cropped turf staring in awe at the surrounding mountains.

It would be a few years later when in my teens and relishing a new school, and its varied outward bound activities, that I came to know Torridon a little better, for it was a frequent destination for our Duke of Edinburgh Award expeditions.

We cut our mountaineering teeth on its wind-scoured ridges, puffed our way to the summits to inhale achingly beautiful views, or perhaps saw nothing through mist as thick as soup, but the effect it had on us was immeasurable. We experienced grey grizzled screes, and the knife-edge spine of Beinn Eighe, the great castellated ramparts and sprawling backbone of the area's highest Munro, Liathach, and then the extraordinary Horns of Beinn Alligin, and its terrifyingly mysterious Eag Dubh, a black gaping wound of a cleft riven between

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summits. There was horizontal rain and midges in swathes; our tents were inundated, and a burn rose to full spate during the small hours, leaving us forced to wade out. But we loved it and quickly learnt that Torridon could be gently benign or mad as a tempest, but it was these qualities that made it so precious, so intoxicating in its wildness and hauteur. In turn it forged in us a great respect.

Like Glencoe, you don’t always have to venture into the hills to feel their splendour, for even driving on Torridon’s single-track roads, you sense you are truly among mountains.

This year marks the 50th Anniversary of the National Trust for Scotland’s stewardship of this savagely beautiful area. In 1967 the Earl of Lovelace’s trustees donated the land, and the organisation has been caring for it ever since.

Author, naturalist and stalker, Lea MacNally was the first ranger to be employed by the Trust. His love and understanding of red deer, and his sensitive approach to the management of this valuable habitat and its wildlife, put him on a pedestal, for he was a pioneer and knew its unsurpassed value.

‘Torridon is not, and never will be, cosily domesticated!’ he wrote in his book on the area. ‘If you do not enjoy living in surroundings of stark and sometimes hostile grandeur, then do not live in Torridon. If you cannot tolerate heavy rain, salt spray and high winds, then do not live in Torridon. To live in Torridon you must enjoy, appreciate and accept Torridon for what it is. It is quite pointless to try to soften its hard edges. It is the hard edges which render Torridon memorable.’

In the past 50 years it is fair to say that little outwardly appears to have altered. The Trust’s only full-time employee here is appropriately Lea MacNally’s nephew Seamus who carries out an incredibly varied role as Torridon’s manager. He is a stalwart of the Mountain Rescue, and has come to know, love and understand the area as well as his famous uncle. He has been here for 27 years and yet finds it hard to quantify the work that has actually taken place on the ground. It is impossible to do so.

Top: The collies take in Torridon’s majesty.
Below: This ancient land holds a rich array of plant and animal life.

With growing numbers of visitors annually and increasing pressure on the five Munros under the Trust’s care in Torridon, maintaining the impressive path network alone is an eternal task. Some years there are vast amounts of money poured into path maintenance which is overseen by the Trust’s expert path manager, Bob Brown from Kinlochewe. Other years it may not require such a cash injection, but the work is continuous and simply never stops.

‘We planted a great many trees during the Millennium Forestry Scheme and now, as there are fewer sheep and deer numbers are kept stable, there are healthy areas of natural regeneration too,’ Seamus says.

Both dotterel and snow bunting have bred here, while sea eagles are becoming an increasingly regular sight, with a pair nesting in the vicinity. Golden eagles and merlin are also resident. Mountain goats occasionally appear in small numbers, but are not currently as numerous as in the past.

One of the most unsolvable issues is that of the invasive rhododendron ponticum. Despite dedicated work to cut and burn the shrub, it continues to vigorously rear its fiendish head and is something that the Trust, not only on Torridon, struggles to keep at bay.

It may indeed seem that in half a century of National Trust for Scotland stewardship, little has altered. Thankfully these glorious mountain vistas are not marred by wind turbines, nor are the erratic hill burns criss-crossed with ugly hydro schemes. Despite the increase in visitor numbers, the Trust ensures paths are well maintained, helping to minimise erosion by thousands of walkers’ boots. To my mind that is worth celebrating for this historic and ancient land, one of the world’s oldest landscapes, remains in safe hands.

I like to think the National Trust for Scotland can help protect it for the next half-century, so that the area and its people flourish and benefit from the increasing numbers of visitors who come to appreciate Torridon’s dramatic grandeur. This is a land and seascape of superlatives.