
Author Adam Watson
By Dr Scott McG Wilson

Title: *Ugly Deeside: land vandalism by big timber machines, but hope for the future with low-impact machines and horse-logging*

Author: Watson, A.
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This thought-provoking monograph by eminent upland ecologist, Dr. Adam Watson, is a clear critique of current mechanised forestry methods as applied to pine-dominated stands (both planted and semi-natural) within the Cairngorms region. Attention focuses on perceived adverse impacts of use of modern heavy harvesting and forwarding machinery on landscape, soils, fresh waters, ground vegetation, wildlife and retained trees. Evidence is adduced from the author’s personal observations, and those of his correspondents, at numerous thinning and clear-felling sites across public, private and charitable landholdings. This is presented in the form of a well-illustrated, but rather fragmentary, field journal, with some critical (at times excoriating) commentaries as to the responses of key public agencies and the efficacy of regulations.

The obvious strength of this publication is its detailed personal field observation, supported by photographic evidence in many cases, and the author’s evident level of knowledge and expertise in upland soil science, forest botany and wildlife conservation. While impacts are sometimes localised within sites, this is not a critique that can prudently be ignored, as it comes at a time when scrutiny from regulators (cf SEPA Forestry HARMS project), particularly in respect of soil and diffuse pollution impacts, has been steadily increasing. Scandinavian machinery and methods have been imported to Britain, without hard winter frosts to protect sites from soil and water impacts. Current increased incidence of concentrated rainfall events heightens the risk of soil damage. The forestry sector has shown an unhealthy reluctance to retreat from counter-productive mechanisation. There is no guarantee that adoption of alternative silvicultural systems will alone resolve the problem, as repeated entries of machines onto sites with limited brash availability may cause considerable damage. The public “mandate to manage”, especially on designated sites, is hard won and easily lost.

Apparent weaknesses of the book are the limited coverage of economically and silviculturally viable alternatives, and what comes over is a rather one-sided argument, emphasising nature conservation at the expense of socio-economic/ rural development imperatives for actively managing pinewoods.
Suggestions for horse-logging and low-impact harvesting equipment are highly relevant, but generally are feasible only on amenity land-holdings with significant subvention of increased costs, not covered by current timber values obtainable within this region. There is an imperfect grasp of the silvicultural role of initial installation of racks, and, surprisingly, no proposal at all of “German-style” permanent rack/matrix thinning systems where heavy machinery is excluded from the “growing surface”. Unsympathetic criticism of agency/regulatory responses appears to ignore binding public funding and policy constraints. The observational evidence could perhaps have been more coherently encapsulated within spatially quantified and temporally integrated case-studies, with forest managers and agency staff allowed to explain their own rationales, making for a more balanced subject coverage.

Reviewer: Dr. Scott McG. Wilson MICFor, MRICS, Aberdeen