



The Bunloit model for nature recovery and community prosperity through rewilding, and its investment implications

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BUNLOIT™ 

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Summary

The Bunloit Project aims to create a nature reserve optimally sequestering carbon, growing biodiversity, creating green jobs, and generating profit-for-purpose in the process. Our first operational site is the 1,200 acre Bunloit estate in Inverness-shire. This, a woodland-dominated terrain, and our next acquisition, a pasture-dominated terrain (details pending), will become open-air laboratories for natural-capital verification-science. We are endeavouring to become a world leader in accelerating the nature-based solutions that can help humankind defeat the existential threats of climate meltdown and biodiversity collapse, meanwhile helping to rebuild ailing national and local economies post-covid. This paper describes how we hope to do that, how we have financed our project so far, and how we plan to do so going forward. Critical to that financing will be an international crowdfunding campaign in the runup to the November 2021 COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow. If this is successful, it will enable mass ownership by nature-recovery advocates of growing tracts of rewilding land in the Highlands of Scotland, and help show how a rural green new deal can help a nation build economic resilience post-covid while making a major contribution to the reversal of global environmental crisis.

Background

Having been a climate-campaigning [environmentalist](#) for more than three decades - first as a university lecturer in earth history (Imperial College), then in an environmental NGO (Greenpeace), then in a renewable energy company (Solarcentury) - I resolved in 2019 to spend the last phase of my life trying to light a candle for hope in a nature-recovery (aka rewilding) project. Having along the way been a founding member of the [Green New Deal Group](#) (2008), it was and is important to me that my rewilding project be community centric. I do not believe we can solve the climate- and biodiversity crises without the full involvement of communities. Nor do I believe we have much chance of holding social cohesion together, in the face of ongoing environmental and other societal stresses, unless strategies and policies emerge that begins to deconstruct the growing inequalities in society: inequalities very [visible](#) in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

Thus motivated I bought the [Bunloit](#) estate in 2020, and began to plan the best way to operate it consistent with the purpose I had set myself, via a company set up for the purpose, Bunloit Rewilding Ltd. I intend to scale the project by adding other plots of land. This paper summarises the model I and my team will be endeavouring to execute on our rewilding sites, and those we might manage for others according to the Bunloit model, as the project unfolds. Consistent with the focus of the IoD Forum, I shall emphasise the investment implications.

Mission

The Bunloit Project defines rewilding as a progressive approach to nature conservation that revitalises forest, peatlands and pastures, providing space for wildlife and flora to flourish and communities to thrive. It creates a landscape that boosts biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and job creation for guardians of the expanding wildland, all at the same time. Accordingly, the mission requires closely measured acceleration of carbon sequestered and biodiversity increased, whilst creating green jobs.

Science

For all this to happen, the Bunloit estate will need to be run as an open-air laboratory for natural-capital verification science. This will provide invaluable data for use in natural-capital accountancy on plots of land acquired in the scaling phase of the project, and in rewilding projects owned by other landowners. The first two sites will be science-focused in this way, one being woodland-dominated (Bunloit), and the second (details to be announced in due course) pasture dominated.

Definitions of rewilding differ among its advocates, and experts tend to differ on how best to go about rewilding projects. Accordingly, I allocated a full first year (March 2020 - March 2021) to conferring with experts across a broad stakeholder base before settling on an operations plan.

Going forward, scientific collaborations will mostly be with local and regional scientists and organisations. Bunloit's science work to date includes local ecologists and researchers from the Universities of the Highlands and Islands and Edinburgh. The project will report on early results in October, ahead of the COP 26 climate summit in Glasgow.

Economics

The aim is to generate profits at ethical levels as early as reasonably possible in the project. This is for two reasons. First, I need to provide working capital and meet payroll in an expanding project, plus service and repay the debt I have raised to set it up. Second, I want to create an economic exemplar that will help encourage other private landowners to the view that rewilding might make better economic sense than environmentally damaging models of land management.

I see five main routes to profitable business models on rewilding estates: natural-capital credits, forestry, regenerative agriculture, eco-tourism and eco-building.

Others are possible, but the route to success, I believe, must involve some or all of these five, and especially the first.

Natural-capital credits

Natural-capital credits include carbon credits, biodiversity-gain credits, and other nature-protection credits. Biodiversity-gain and nature-protection credits barely exist today, but governments in both Westminster and Holyrood have promised they will be introduced before long. Carbon credits exist, but are not yet economic for most players, because carbon prices do not yet reflect the existential gravity of the climate crisis. This is likely to change quickly if governments succeed at the 2021 climate summit during November in Glasgow, and indeed may well change in expectation of success there.

The Bunloit Project is to some degree a bet on the green intentions of governments and / or progressive corporations seeking to promote natural-capital credits as a route to abating the climate- and biodiversity crises. Forestry, agriculture, eco-tourism and eco-building can all slow the cash burn in rewilding projects, and in some cases reverse it, in concert. But without a system change in the economic reward system for land management, many rewilding projects will surely struggle to be profitable.

Forestry

The year of conferring has led to only one outcome where consensus among expert conferees can be identified almost to the point of universal agreement. That involves the felling of monoculture plantations, which are numerous on both Bunloit and Beldorney. It seems somewhat counter-intuitive to begin a rewilding programme aiming to sequester carbon in large quantities by felling thousands of trees, but the scientific arguments for so doing - summarized [elsewhere](#) - are strong.

Serendipitously, the timber price is currently high. If it continues to be so in September when our felling programme starts, forestry will help slow our cash burn.

Regenerative agriculture

Community-centric rewilding invites attention to sustainable food production in the mix of regenerative activities and processes on a rewilding site. In designing programmes for our rewilding sites, the Bunloit team will be guided by the [conclusion](#) of 130 national academies of science and medicine across the world

that the world food system is broken and requires radical transformation. We will politely confront any stakeholders who might suggest (based on experiences of rewilding projects elsewhere) that we are somehow being dysfunctional or anti-social in our approach. We will deploy the conclusions of the academies, and other authoritative [studies](#), that we need to eat much less meat, including beef and lamb, and eat far more beans, pulses and fruits. We will reflect these imperatives in the food production we undertake.

Eco-tourism

There are already very many tourism ventures in the Highlands of Scotland, and many of these are strongly ecology-focused. I am keen for the Bunloit Project to be a leader in offering economic diversification. That said, we will clearly be creating an attractive venue for visitors particularly interested in nature recovery. So we will be offering packages for rewilding advocates going forward, endeavouring as we do so to constrain footfall in our wilding habitats, and to enhance rather than compete with tourism run by the local community. For example, we will maintain only limited facilities on Bunloit, and encourage those who book on our guided wildland walking tours to stay in local hotels and B&Bs.

Eco-building

I aim to create a small new community on the rewilding land, built around the workers newly employed there. If the project is to be an exemplar for the green new deal, I need to create as many new jobs as cash flow allows.

Where possible I need to house estate workers, and host eco-enterprises ideally built around products from the estate/s. This I aim to do via judicious building of small numbers of zero-carbon timber-frame eco-enterprises and homes on the land I own.

Property prices are rising fast in the rural Highlands of Scotland, and homes are becoming unaffordable - either to rent or own - in many areas. I hope the Bunloit Project will help address this ruinous rising inequality. We will aim to build both affordable and premium homes in the mix of our eco-building, and market the premium homes to buyers prepared to pay a self-imposed levy to subsidise the affordability of the starter homes. We will test whether buyers who understand the social imperative for such altruism exist. I believe they do.

If that doesn't work, I will build to rent, offering Bunloit workers first refusal to be tenants.

Local community

A community-centric version of rewilding obviously entails involving and conferring with the existing local community as much as possible. The most obvious route to involvement is to hire locally. Of the seven team members recruited at Bunloit so far, six either live locally (in Glen Urquhart), or nearby in the Highlands, or have done so in the past. Other involvement options being pursued at Bunloit include synergy with the local schools, beginning with outdoor classes for students.

The project must also confer on its plans, as best we can given the constraints of covid restrictions, and certainly go beyond statutory requirements. After a year of outreach locally, including a mass outreach phase for the last two months, we have found enough of a majority in support of our eco-building plans to warrant investigation of planning permission with Highland Council. This has amounted to a circa 2:1 ratio of support among the private conversations, private e-mails, and open website contributions that we have elicited so far. We recognize this entails a minority of residents in Glen Urquhart, and that full planning permission would require comprehensive outreach including mailing all residents. We are encouraged to go ahead by evidence that the more we invite people to see our work and intentions on the ground, the more we observe support tending to grow. We also believe that we can win over some of our current opponents by amending our plans in response to community input.

I will also pay a self-imposed tax on Bunloit Rewilding Ltd, 10% of net profit. This will go to projects to-be-determined in the local communities where we work. This is a mechanism I have used before: Solarcentury donated 5% of annual net profits to solar entrepreneurs in communities in Africa, via a social enterprise set up for the purpose, SolarAid.

Investment and funding strategy

Most of the acreage where rewilding is underway in Scotland is owned by billionaires. While great work is underway on the estates they own, the Bunloit Project aims to make the case that ordinary people can be owners of rewilding land, whether as individuals, consortia of individuals, or as communities. I think of this as "citizen rewilding".

For citizen rewilding to happen, four crucial elements need to emerge: bank lending at low interest rates, crowdfunding at scale, corporate green unilateralism, and higher levels of philanthropic grantmaking. The Bunloit Project is taking a "build it and they will come" approach to all four.

Bank lending: I aspire to attract the first bank lending to citizen rewilding by being innovative with business modelling ahead of the advent of system change in

the land-management reward system. Whilst the Bunloit Project may be prepared to take a bet on governmental common-sense in instigating that system change, I probably cannot expect most bank credit committees to yet, given their dismal record in anything much to do with fashioning a survivable society to date.

Crowdfunding: The project will be running a retail crowdfunding campaign in October and November, in the run up to, and during, the Glasgow climate summit. In this we will be inviting ordinary citizens to invest in the scaling of the project, hoping it will be particularly attractive to citizens in communities in the Highlands and Islands and elsewhere. In this campaign, we will be attempting to create an example of a much-needed platform for mass climate action and social empowerment, on an international basis.

Corporate green unilateralism: In the interim I will making judicious approaches to corporations who I know are amendable in principle to corporate environmentalism and the meaningful deployment of their own resources ahead of government action. I will explore whether they might view favourably some level of investment in, or funding of, our project.

Philanthropic funding: For the frontiers of our work, where risk / reward is too much even for our mission-congruent investors, I will be approaching foundations and other philanthropic funders. The basic commercial activities in the Bunloit Project business plan will be financed by working capital already raised. Executing the plan successfully with that capital will hopefully merit national resonance on the frontiers of the project's nature-based-solutions purpose, in a nexus of carbon sequestration, biodiversity gain, natural-capital verification science, rewilding, regenerative agriculture, the rural green new deal, and inspirational solutions education. But I dream of the Bunloit Project being a world leader in all this: an amazing, inspirational front runner in accelerating the climate and biodiversity survival reflex in society. I believe that grant support for experimental projects across the nexus of the project's activities, in a range of activities that could never aspire to investor sign-off on the basis of standard economic norms alone, is a good route to achieving this dream. And obviously I agree with the many people who are [suggesting](#) that the philanthropic world has not, as yet, deployed enough of its vast capital on the climate and biodiversity crises.

Investment to date

The Bunloit Project kicked off in February 2020 entirely funded by crowdfunded debt: a £2.7 million bond at 5% p.a. interest. The investment came from 20 rewilding advocates in my network of affluent friends and associates, and networks of theirs.

As of December 2020, with the sale of Solarcentury to Statkraft, I was able to join them with cash of my own. The proceeds of the company sale netted just over £3

million for my personal use. I will risk the suggestion - given this is an amount equivalent to selling a single home in a London suburb - that I am closer to being a citizen rewilder than a billionaire rewilder. I have allocated most of this £3 million to the project and will deploy the rest as we scale.

In May 2020, I raised a second bond among original investors and others keen to join the project: £1.4 million, also at 5% p.a. Many of the original investors invested again, alongside 8 new investors keen to join the project.

Entering 2021, the Bunloit Project's bondholder community consisted of 28 individuals and organisations, include four former FTSE 100 CEOs, three family offices, two C-suite directors of FTSE-quoted funds, the CEO of the world's largest solar developer, a former CIO of a Swedish state pension fund, and the founder of one of the UK's fastest growing internet retailers. The total that they, the other bondholders and I had invested for the purchase and future operation of the Bunloit estate, its operation by Bunloit Rewilding Ltd, and the scaling of the project, was £7.1 million.

Investment going forward

Based on progress to date, I am hopeful for all four potential additional investment routes. Several of the major banks have rejected my applications for loan finance, and as things stand no bank has ever loaned money to a rewilding project, that I know of. But I do not expect the banks to be able to continue with this for long. Their green rhetoric is becoming too discordant with such a stance. HSBC, for example, has advertised its effort to create the world's largest natural capital fund with these words: "Nature Is Capital." I expect one of the banks positioned as an ethical brand to break the chain of incongruence between banking-industry rhetoric and environmental imperative. And once they do, I do not expect public banks like the new Scottish National Investment Bank to be far behind them.

Having achieved success with high-net-worth-only crowdfunding, at least at the level that has allowed me to start the Bunloit Project, I now want to extend to retail crowdfunding, in the campaign mentioned above. The success of progressive companies like [Brewdog](#) in crowdfunding for environmental projects encourages my optimism. So too does the number of incoming enquiries from people hoping to hold shares in the scaling of the Bunloit Project. This equity potential is in active planning at present. With incoming equity, the project can realistically expect to leverage further debt from banks, at lower interest rates than I offered my pioneering bondholders.

And so, in principle, the scaling can grow. Once the snowball described above begins to move downhill, the next stage is to approach pension funds. I am particularly excited by the prospect that Nordic pension funds will invest in

rewilding at growing scale - in the Bunloit Project and others like it - based on my knowledge and experience of them.

In conclusion, I suggest that despite the gravity of our current societal crises, hope lives, and rewilding will be a major element in society's survival reflex in the years ahead. I pledge that the Bunloit Project will do its very best to play a useful role in helping make that happen.