

What Price Mountains?

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John Muir Trust Journal, Issue 29, Summer 2000

“Why then, one might ask, could anyone have reservations about the John Muir Trust owning a significant part of Ben Nevis?” Nick Kempe invites debate.

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Introduction

Ben Nevis is the single most important mountain in the British Isles. It is our highest mountain, a symbol as well as a major tourist asset. It is more important than any other in terms of the quality of the recreational resource, particularly for its ice climbing which is world class, but also because even the simple walk up the tourist path involves significantly more effort in terms of height ascended than any other mountain. For many non-mountaineers it is the hardest walk they do in their lives. It is important for conservation, particularly in terms of Arctic-Alpine plant communities, and as such part of it is a Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI). The scenery of its North face is superb, particularly under snow, and offers the nearest we have to an Alpine landscape, while on clear days the summit offers stupendous views.

At the same time, Ben Nevis is under some pressure as a result of human impacts and there are significant issues relating to paths – particularly the tourist track – to the proliferation of memorials and cairns on the summit plateau, and to litter, as well as more local issues such as human waste disposal around the CIC climber’s hut. There is no doubt in my mind that the mountain needs a reasonable amount of investment and needs to be managed according to best conservation principles. Why then, one might ask, could anyone have reservations about the John Muir Trust owning a significant part of Ben Nevis?

WHO should OWN our most important mountains?

While it is undoubtedly a step forward that a significant part of Ben Nevis has passed from an individual private owner without resources to a conservation body with some

resources, and that certain risks associated with private ownership have been removed, this still leaves some questions about whether ownership by the John Muir Trust (JMT) is the right solution for Ben Nevis.

First, within an international context, private ownership of mountains is an oddity. Most ownership abroad is either communal or by the state. People, whether individuals or communities, do own the lower ground but not the “*mountain wastes*”. This is partly because historically people had no interest in owning ground which had no productive purpose. Scotland was probably very similar to other countries with mountains – as illustrated by the current dispute about whether there has ever been a title deed to the Cuillin – until the advent of sheep and then deer forests. However, the last thirty years has seen a fundamental shift away from our mountains being places for private recreation and profit to being places for public enjoyment and recreation. This should raise questions about the most appropriate forms of ownership and management of our mountain wastes.

Second, why JMT rather than some other conservation organisation such as the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) or Scottish Natural Heritage? Or indeed why not a Nevis Trust or the nation, so long as management was according to best conservation principles and people with an interest in the mountain, particularly mountaineers and local people, were given real power in the way it was managed? At the moment who owns what owes more to the lottery of the “*market*” than to any rational considerations. All the conservation organisations need to start considering their role in relation both to each other and to the conservation needs of Scotland as a whole.

WHO should PAY FOR our highest mountains?

Ben Nevis is so important that I do not think it should be left to the generosity of individual members of the public to secure its future. It is a national asset and there should be a national responsibility to ensure it is conserved, protected and managed properly. There is even a strong argument for this in conventional economic terms: Ben Nevis attracts 70,000 plus visitors a year to its summit, yet employed until recently the equivalent of one full-time person (far fewer than any museum attracting that number of visitors). Our failure to invest in our mountains should be a national issue.

If we cannot get the government to act to protect and invest in our most important mountain, we are hardly likely to do so for other less important mountains such as the Cuillin. The simple fact is that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) cannot afford to buy all, or even a fraction of, our important mountain land – or even certain key areas, as we saw when the most recent sale of Glen Feshie took place while conservation bodies were trying to get the funding together. If the NGOs step in and buy land where we might just have a chance of getting government to do so, we are actually weakening the conservation position overall.

It is worth noting that the last major government land purchase was Creag Meagaidh in 1985, and that by a government committed to non-intervention. We now have a government in Scotland ostensibly committed to land reform but with no strategy for it. The fact that NGOs have stepped forward as government has stepped back is not

just a coincidence. We need a national strategy on mountain issues, which includes the role of NGOs.

I therefore believe that the time has come for the NGOs to make quite clear that they cannot and will not fundraise to buy other important land, and that it is time for government to become involved again. The JMT could kick-start this process by making clear that it does not intend to purchase the rest of Ben Nevis because of the resources required, and by supporting calls for government involvement. This would leave open the question of whether the JMT might use its expertise to manage any land purchased by the state.

For those sceptical about influencing government, just consider the effect if every person who gave to the Ben Nevis appeal (or all the other appeals by the JMT, NTS, RSPB, etc) also wrote or visited their MSPs or MPs. We would be a major lobbying force. Securing the future of the rest of Ben Nevis would be an ideal place for us to start.

HOW MUCH should we pay for our highest mountains?

The £450,000 that the JMT is paying for the Fairfax-Lucy estate appears cheap compared with the £10 million asking price for the Cuillin and a real snip compared with what the National Trust paid for part of Snowdon. However, this does not necessarily mean there are no questions to be asked.

I have already referred to the world phenomenon that mountain wastes tend not to be in private ownership, partly because they have so little commercial value. A significant part of the Fairfax-Lucy estate comes into that category, the land above the 2,500 feet contour being not capable of supporting any activity except outdoor recreation. The lower ground is also rocky and is of limited value. There appears to be no appreciable stalking on the estate while sheep grazing has been, I understand, let for £3,000 a year. A minimal 2.5 percent return on capital would indicate a value of around £120,000.

So, how does land with so little current commercial value get to be valued as £450,000? The answer is by independent valuation, although it is not at all clear what criteria the valuers used – or indeed what criteria *we* should use to value mountains.

In terms of current valuation practices the Fairfax-Lucy estate is not cheap. The JMT has bought 4,185 acres of Ben Nevis and neighbouring hills for £450,000, or £110 an acre. In other recent estate sales, researched by Andy Wightman (<http://www.whoownsscotland.org.uk>), costs have ranged from £174 to £18 an acre. However, almost all of these estates include substantial stalking, forestry, buildings and even farms in the price. Even then the cost of purchasing Mar Lodge in 1996 worked out at £71 an acre and Knoydart last year went for only £41 an acre.

The only arguments I can see for paying £450,000 are social cachet (on the lines that estates close to Balmoral might go for more as they make you a neighbour of the Queen); or to stop a developer getting it.

It is hard to see the social cachet factor applying to Ben Nevis, with its 70,000 visitors a year.

This leaves the developer argument. It is only a few years since David Michels, as head of the leisure group Stakis, suggested a railway to the summit, and I am sure advertisers would pay a fair whack for billboards along the tourist path – but could these things ever happen? The answer is: not if we pressured government to implement strong planning laws (or mechanisms like national parks) to protect our mountains and wild land. What price then the land? It is hard to avoid asking the question whether NGOs are not propping up the land prices in the Highlands.

This question is important because, whether government or the voluntary sector pays it, every £1 spent on buying mountains is potentially £1 less available for their management.

Ownership and Management

There is a clear distinction to be made between management according to conservation principles and actual ownership. The problem is that over the last 10 to 15 years the two have become increasingly equated, and instead of pressing for national solutions to the needs of wild land, there has been a tendency to solve problems by buying it. Paradoxically the result has been that conservation has become marginalised to areas owned by NGOs rather than becoming part of mainstream policy and practice. We need public debate on these issues, including the role that NGOs should play, and we need to pressurise government into taking a much greater interest than it does at present.

Future Management of Ben Nevis

Meantime consideration of these wider issues should be combined with consideration of the current needs of Ben Nevis. Much of Ben Nevis remains out with conservation ownership or management, notably all the main access paths up to 2,500 feet, the whole of the North face, and the Polldubh crags. While JMT is trying to raise, on top of the purchase price, a further £500,000 to manage the Fairfax-Lucy land, this implies that a further £1 million is needed for effective management of the rest of the mountain. Without investment in the rest of Ben Nevis, and indeed the surrounding area, there is little hope of any effective overall management of the mountain and the efforts of the JMT are likely to be undermined.

It is time therefore that we pressed the Government to make a significant financial contribution to the needs of what is one of our greatest national and natural assets.

Further Information

Nick Kempe was President of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MC of S) 1994 to 1998, and has had a strong interest in issues relating to the management of Ben Nevis since the MC of S approached Highland Council to set up a Nevis Forum.

The John Muir Trust can be contacted via their website: <http://www.jmt.org/>