

Wild lawyers meet up at Coniston, Lake District, for a Guided Tour of Glenridding Estate

Once again, the calendar has come around to the end of May and it is time for the UKELA wild lawyers to gather for their annual coming together to explore and discuss theoretical and practical issues dear to their hearts: wilderness, rewilding, ecological restoration, legal personality for nature, and much more. This year attention is on the practicalities of estate management and balancing restoration of nature with everyday farming and agricultural management. The focus of attention is an upland estate, recently leased by the John Muir Trust for three years at Glenridding in the Lake District of England, covering sheep-grazing land stretching up to the highest levels and taking in the iconic mountain Helvellyn (950m).

For the first time the John Muir Trust, based in Pitlochry in Scotland, has leased land to manage in England, and with that they have taken on a new ecosystem, a different legal system and different methods and traditions of managing the land. In particular, the presence of specially protected breeds of sheep, notably the Herdwick, and protected grazing rights held as 'commons' by two sheep farmers ensures the need for JMT's finely honed management skills to come to the fore. The Lake District is much loved by many people, both those who live and work there and those who come to it from outside as an enchanted space that adds value and meaning to their lives. Many people must be consulted, many concerns addressed and a path found that preserves traditional scenery and ways, while moving forward to restore elements that have been lost over the years.

A whole day, Saturday, was devoted to walking the ground, studying different ecological and farming dimensions, seeing how paths were being repaired and learning about rewilding possibilities that might be envisaged for the future over the years, in partnership with the local community. The day's excursion spanned the length of the estate from Glenridding village, with a pause at Red Tarn for a sandwich stop, up the craggy Swirral Edge to Helvellyn, followed by a gentle return to the minibus via Whiteside Bank. The Wild lawyers warmly thanked their expert guides from JMT, Pete Barron and Isaac Johnston for their time and enthusiasm.

Over the years, it has become a tradition for the Wild Lawyers group to spend the first day of their weekend on a guided visit to an estate where rewilding and ecological restoration are underway and the second day in direct personal experience of wild land, or wilderness, through a day's hike. This year was no exception. The first day had been spent at Glenridding Estate; the second day was for personal exploration of mountain ecology. From the weekend base at YHA Coniston Coppermines a path led directly up to the high hills behind and surrounding it. Long and high enough to be challenging and offer magnificent views far and wide. The weather had been kind on the previous day and was again so on this Sunday, though it should be mentioned that there had been an initial damp start on the Friday, the day of arrival, as the 19 participants gathered from far and wide, though mostly by train from the south, collected at Penrith station by Crispin and John and brought by minibus up to the wild and sheep-busy track that leads to the former mining office that now caters for YHA residents. The Sunday walk led past the summits of Wetherlam (762m) and Swirl How to the Old Man of Coniston (803m). The wind gusted fiercely on the tops in the afternoon, and for those brave enough to try it a cool dip in Low Water Tarn on the way down provided gratifying reinvigoration.

Yet, if a Wild Lawyers weekend is about visiting, experiencing and learning at first hand about wildness, wilderness and ecology, it is also about meeting, exchanging ideas, talking and rethinking one's assumptions. New participants are warmly welcomed, and the old hands reminisce over past achievements. A happy exchange, which goes on continuously, from breakfast till past dinner time.

For the evenings too are spent in discussion. On the first evening, a warm welcome to all and information about the weekend plan, followed by topics that were new for this year. The Wild Law conveners discussed the Wild Law website and how to make it better. A conference on Wild Law is being organised in Bristol on 21 September 2018, and abstracts, presentations and participations are sought. (Information on UKELA website). Thirdly followed discussion on a concept brought into being in recent times by court decisions round the world and particular legislation in New Zealand (*Te Awa Tupua* (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017). The concept is 'legal personality' for aspects of nature, such as rivers, mountains, ecosystems. Was that a good idea, or necessary, and if so how should the concept be organised? Here, the big advantage, it was suggested, was that it could mean a community learning about new development proposals immediately and having a chance to discuss them on their merits from the outset, rather than being able to take action only after decisions had been made, when it was too late. The Wild Law view perceives the community as being closely involved with the concept of legal personality for nature and being its principal defender. So, the point seemed very relevant.

On the Sunday evening the group were treated to an exposition of a farming view of Lake District management by Julia Aglionby of Natural England. She began with an introduction to the English law of commons, which is where persons who are not owners of land may have rights to graze a certain number of sheep or cattle. Commons were widespread in former times. They have been whittled down in recent centuries through enclosure of land, but they remain important in many places, such as at Glenridding in the Lake District. Her talk neatly complemented the visit of the previous day. It left the group thinking that perhaps it could also be good to spend a day studying the realities of a working farm. How far are farmers the principal managers of land and restorers of nature and wildlife? What roles for pesticides and artificial fertilisers? What role for organic farming in health and ecological restoration? What balance between livestock and wildlife? What is the impact of subsidies? Many questions for future discussions.

And so, all too soon the weekend was over, the train south was beckoning, the minibus filled up and the abandoned Coppermines were left to the quiet grazing of the sheep, white against green under an azure blue sky. Time now to review images for the website and to plan for next year's adventure together, but also to become a member of John Muir Trust and donate to their fund for the ecological restoration of Helvellyn. Thank you to everyone who contributed so much to the success of the weekend! Thank you, Simon for making the arrangements and planning.

Colin D. Robertson

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