

Conservation in conversation: People's perspectives on a woodland with high conservation value—A qualitative study

Alice Hague¹  | Anke Fischer^{2,a}  | Anja Byg^{3,a}  | Alba Juarez-Bourke¹  |
 Scott Herrett¹  | Antonia Eastwood⁴ 

¹Social, Economic & Geographical Sciences, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, UK

²Division of Environmental Communication, Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden

³Independent researcher, Aberdeen, UK

⁴Ecological Sciences, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, UK

Correspondence

Alice Hague
 Email: alice.hague@hutton.ac.uk

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Abstract

1. Concepts such as ecosystem services and nature's contributions to people are frameworks for articulating the value of nature and biodiversity conservation. Yet it remains difficult to argue for the conservation of species and habitats where they are inconspicuous or 'non-charismatic'.
2. This paper investigates the perceptions of a woodland area in rural western Scotland, designated for its high conservation value and characterised by habitats, rare species and species assemblages with limited appreciation by non-experts and no obvious 'utility' value. Based on interviews with residents and visitors as well as workshops with participants representing different types of local expertise, we show how people experience and perceive the benefits from such woodlands.
3. Overall, our study participants emphasised values and ecosystem services that benefitted humans, strongly drawing on stories of cultural or historical land use to argue for more material opportunities to be created. For those participants without ecological expertise, the designated conservation value, albeit respected and accepted, remained vague and bland.
4. Participants also articulated a strong underlying development logic, pushing in some way for 'more' to be made from the woodlands so that more people could receive benefits from the woodland either directly (e.g. mental restoration; increased use for recreation) or indirectly (e.g. through creating jobs in the local tourism industry).
5. Our findings suggest that managing for conservation alone might cause challenges in acceptability, especially where the species and habitats conserved are of little obvious value to the non-specialist. At the same time, participants recognised that they valued the woodland being unique in some way, and that increasing the material use of the woods might harm the very essence of what made it special.

^aResearch undertaken while employed at The James Hutton Institute, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen, UK.

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KEYWORDS

biodiversity, ecosystem services, multiple benefits, rare species, Scotland, woodland management

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, biodiversity conservation policies, and much of the applied ecological sciences, have been dominated by concepts such as ecosystem services (ES), nature-based solutions, natural capital and nature's contributions to people (Costanza et al., 1997; Díaz et al., 2018; Nesshöver et al., 2017). ES has been adopted by decision-makers seeking to account for the importance of natural resources and sustainable land management practices within neo-liberal economic frameworks. The ES concept has enabled 'value' to be placed on benefits important for human well-being that are not well captured within a market system (Greenhalgh & Hart, 2015; Wynne-Jones, 2014).

Critics have pointed to practical as well as ethical limitations of these approaches that claim to prioritise ecosystems, but arguably give greater precedence to potential benefits for humans (Lele et al., 2013; Schröter et al., 2014). Concepts such as 'relational values' have been proposed to overcome the apparent conflict between intrinsic and instrumental values of nature, drawing on aspects such as care, concern, reciprocity and stewardship in conservation practice (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019; Chan et al., 2018) and emphasising the relations and interactions between people with nature as a way to create a 'wiser relationship with the natural environment' (Muradian & Pascual, 2018, 8).

Recent debate has also focused on emphasising the social-ecological context of ecosystems and understanding the role of humans as integral in the production of ES. Rather than seeing humans principally as beneficiaries of nature's services (MEA, 2005; Plieninger et al., 2013), studies emphasising the active role of humans in producing values, relationships, products and services as well as shaping habitats and their diversity (Chan et al., 2011; Fischer & Eastwood, 2016) are increasing. This debate also recognises that engaging different perspectives is critical for successful biodiversity conservation (Pascual et al., 2021), adding importance to findings by Byg et al. (2020) and De Vreese et al. (2019) that public and stakeholders' ideas of nature often differ from scientific ES classifications.

Despite this discussion, many argue that the conservation of biological diversity, of global concern not least since the adoption of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992, is not particularly well served by such frameworks (Dee et al., 2017; Ridder, 2008). Despite the key role of biodiversity in ecosystem functioning (Cardinale et al., 2012), and emphasis that biodiversity and human well-being are 'inextricably linked' (MEA, 2005, iii), biodiversity was included in the document introducing the ecosystem service concept, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, as a 'supporting' ecosystem service rather than as a good in its own right (Mace et al., 2012), and does not feature explicitly in the influential CICES (2018) classification.

The ES framework and 'nature's benefits to people' can thus provide challenges where limited resources are prioritised to support ES of direct human relevance, deprioritising processes that do not have specific benefits to people (Ingram et al., 2012), and where spending decisions are influenced by values such as beauty or charisma (Albert et al., 2018; Habel et al., 2021).

Within the ES framework, there is also a concerted push towards managing ecosystems for 'multiple benefits' and objectives in policy and practice (Ellis et al., 2019; Maes, Egoh, et al., 2012) with an implicit expectation that managing for multiple ES will lead to better management for biodiversity conservation (MEA, 2005). However, managing for multiple services is challenging. Despite claims that the right management can produce 'win-win' situations for conservation and other aims, the reality is that trade-offs and compromise are frequently required (McShane et al., 2011; Watson et al., 2020). There are mixed findings about whether managing for multiple ES enhances biodiversity conservation (Dee et al., 2017; Eastwood et al., 2016), although recent research by Watson et al. (2020) points to likely positive benefit to biodiversity if a broad range of ES are targeted. There is also a risk that policymakers and land managers focus on managing for objectives that are easy to quantify, thereby disadvantaging objectives which might have a broad but less material benefit to society (Maes, Paracchini, et al., 2012; Small et al., 2017).

Despite broad levels of support for biodiversity conservation from members of the forestry sector (Hemery et al., 2020), and members of the public being able to provide detailed descriptions of the intricacies of biodiversity when asked specifically about them (Austen et al., 2021; Fischer & Young, 2007), studies show that even with a 'generalist pro-environmental discourse', there is a lack of awareness and interest in biodiversity conservation across Europe (Troumbis, 2021). Researchers have also argued that the conservation movement needs to acknowledge and consider how to deal with ambivalent perspectives about habitats and species that could be considered 'non-charismatic' (Byg et al., 2017).

It can thus remain difficult to argue for the conservation of species and habitats where they are not directly connected to focal ES, because they are inconspicuous, 'non-charismatic' or widely unappreciated (Habel et al., 2021). Our study takes this consideration of 'non-charismatic' habitats and species further, and examines ideas of nature and conservation in a context where biodiversity arguments underpin multiple designations of a site, but where this biodiversity is non-spectacular in common terms, and difficult to access and experience (Byg et al., 2020).

The study explores how residents and visitors to a woodland area describe how they experience and perceive the benefits and values from woodlands with a conservation value that is not easily recognisable by non-experts. We focus on a specific setting (Church

et al., 2011) that is coherent as a unit from the perspective of the people living nearby and visiting, but which includes several different habitat types. We find that in addition to general support for biodiversity and conservation aims, people articulate a strong desire for development, centring narratives of past human benefit and future desire for 'more' to be made of woodland areas, even when those woodlands are of high conservation value. Our findings have implications for managing sites for multiple benefits: the focus on woodland habitats important for non-charismatic species such as lichens, and rare species constellations such as specific types of woodland habitats, enables us to consider how people perceive forest management initiatives that focus on improving biodiversity.

2 | METHODS

We adopted a qualitative research approach, seeking depth of insight and understanding about perceptions of biodiversity. The Scottish Government has operationalised the ecosystem services concept in policy and practice (Claret et al., 2018); thus we base our study around a Scottish woodland managed for conservation aims by national organisations, with conservation designations for its habitats and species.

2.1 | Research approach

Given the importance of context in determining ecosystem services (Tew et al., 2019), we adopted a place-based research approach to understand nuance of context when addressing issues of woodland management, focusing our study around the Glen Creran woodlands (see Section 2.2). Our data collection efforts (Table 1) combined (a) semi-structured interviews with (b) discussions at locally held workshops, complemented by (c) background interviews with key informants.

We carried out semi-structured interviews ($n = 17$) with residents and day visitors in September 2017, recruiting residents through local businesses, knocking on doors and snowball sampling

and by approaching visitors at woodland car parks and in a nearby café. Six of the interviews involved couples rather than individuals (the overall number of interviewees was thus $n = 23$). Our interview guide included questions on people's relationship with, and use of, the woodlands; their perceptions of the area and its management; and the values they associated with the woodlands. Where appropriate, we also probed their perceptions of dilemmas and challenges of woodland management. Given the diversity of interviewees (including long-term residents and day visitors with varying levels of knowledge of the area), interviews varied greatly in length, ranging from 8 to 73 min (mean = 38 min). The shortest interviews were speculative approaches to visitors onsite.

We also draw on qualitative data from two day-long workshops held with local stakeholders with diverse expertise including hospitality and tourism, ecology, land management, community development and education. These workshops were held in April 2018 (7 participants) and January 2019 (9 participants). All workshop participants were familiar with the Glen Creran woodlands, and were invited for their complementary interests and knowledges, ranging from hospitality and recreation expertise to more ecological perspectives. Workshops were framed around a scenario-planning technique (Waylen et al., 2015), designed to stimulate discussions about preferences for woodland management and about values placed by participants on different ecosystem benefits. The style of questioning at the workshops was thus distinct from the interviews, but deliberative discussions about ecosystem services and benefits offered insights about perceptions of woodlands and ecosystem services. Background interviews with staff at local public sector agencies also informed our study.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the James Hutton Institute's Research Ethics Committee (applications 98/2017 and 126/2018). All participants gave written and informed consent to participating and signed consent forms are held by the James Hutton Institute. In all, 12 interviews were digitally recorded, as were the workshop discussions. Researchers made fieldnotes immediately after interviews to record the content of the non-recorded interviews, and of background interviews with key informants.

Sept 2017	Interviews
Local residents	11 interviews (13 individuals of which 2 couples)
Visitors	6 interviews (10 individuals of which 4 couples)
Total	17 interviews (23 individuals)
	Workshops (All local residents and/or with knowledge of the woodlands)
April 2018	7 individuals (3 ecology; 1 community development; 1 tourism/hospitality; 2 other)
Jan 2019	9 individuals (2 land management; 2 education/recreation; 5 ecology)
Total	16 individuals

TABLE 1 Overview of interview and workshop participants

Note: In Section 3, we refer to 'Resident + identifier' for resident interviews, 'Visitor + identifier' for interviews with visitors; and 'Workshop participant + identifier' when using direct quotes. We take care to distinguish between residents, visitors and workshop participants to reflect the diversity of knowledge that people brought to the discussion.

Interview recordings and workshop discussions were transcribed, and data coded manually using NVivo 11/12 software. In the first instance, the transcripts and notes were analysed inductively in a grounded way to identify key themes in the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). Such themes included, for example, tourism, access, biodiversity, management, information, recreation, solitude, well-being and wilderness. The data were then re-read multiple times and further analysed. Codes were refined in discussion between authors to move beyond well-established concepts such as cultural or provisioning ecosystem services, while still drawing on insights from the literature, to identify how participants' concerns and perspectives about the woodlands can be interpreted in the context of debates about ES and biodiversity conservation. The resulting themes (see Section 3) reflected the participants' perspectives on different aspects of value connected to the woodlands, relating to its biodiversity, aesthetics and opportunities for recreation and local economic benefit, but also crosscutting ideas, such as the need for development and managing for multiple benefits and the role of cultural history in underpinning contemporary relationships with the place.

2.2 | Study site

The case study area is Glen Creran, a quiet valley in western Scotland containing woodlands under different management and ownership regimes and histories. This woodland area is described as a 'biodiversity hotspot' (McDonnell, 2014) and was selected because of its rural location and conservation value [approx. 705 ha is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), of which 169 ha is designated as a National Nature Reserve (NNR)]. The valley is accessed along an unclassified, single track, road that leads off a popular tourist route noted for its coastal scenery and mountains. The glen is sparsely populated, with only a few dwellings located along the single-track road. The nearest centre of population is Oban (population approx. 8500) approximately 30 km away.

The woodlands are relevant for our study because their national and international conservation designations are for habitats and species that are not obvious to the untrained eye, and often require conflicting management actions. The presence of native woodland habitats, specifically, mixed woodland on base-rich soils associated with rocky slopes (FCS, 2016) and old sessile oakwood and upland ashwood interest with holly *Ilex aquifolium* and ferns *Blechnum spicant* (JNCC, 2022), underpin the designation as a Special Area for Conservation. Otter *Lutra lutra* are also present, but not considered a primary reason for the site's designation. By contrast, the designation of the area as an SSSI includes notification for upland oak woodland, bryophyte (moss) and lichen assemblages and butterflies (chequered skipper *Carterocephalus palaemon* and pearl-bordered fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne*).

The lichen and moss assemblages are arguably only recognisable by specialists (McDonnell, 2014). Chequered skipper and pearl-bordered fritillary butterflies could be considered the most 'charismatic' species for conservation purposes, but are also difficult to

identify and only visible as adult butterflies for a few weeks each year. The woodlands pose a management challenge, with the species identified in conservation designations requiring both sheltered ground and small breaks in woodland with relatively high levels of humidity and sunlight (for lichens and mosses) and larger, warmer and open glades (for butterflies) to thrive. The woodlands are of highly variable structure, 'ranging from lightly stocked open birch scrub woodland to almost continuous canopy oak high forest' and including ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, alder *Alnus glutinosa*, hazel *Corylus avellana* and holly (FCS, 2016: 2). Areas previously planted for exotic conifers such as Sitka spruce *Picea sitchensis* are gradually being removed and replaced by native woodland through natural regeneration, with active management interventions to reduce the growth of non-native and invasive species such as rhododendron, and to protect species such as ash from browsing pressure.

Management responsibility lies with two national land management organisations and regulatory bodies (Forestry and Land Scotland and NatureScot) which manage the area largely for conservation benefit. The surrounding area also includes privately owned woodlands. Current management plans focus on allowing natural changes in the habitat to progress 'as far as possible' while maintaining the rarest species present, working to legal obligations to manage for the woodland's internationally important features (McDonnell, 2014, 5–6; FCS, 2016).

To encourage the recreational use of the woodlands, two small car parks are provided for visitors, with directional signage and information boards giving limited visitor information. Short, circular trails (1–2 km) have been incorporated into the woodlands, but there are few panoramic views over the nearby loch, often considered important in determining 'attractiveness' of a place (Galindo & Hidalgo, 2005), and little to see beyond dense, woodland regrowth along most of the path. No additional facilities other than a small number of picnic tables are provided.

3 | RESULTS

Our participants talked about the area in terms of five different aspects of value: biodiversity; recreation and aesthetics; local economic benefit; multiple benefits; and cultural history. While three of these themes are closely connected to benefits identified in common categories of ecosystem services, an emphasis on multiple benefits, and ideas of the role of cultural history in shaping the area and its past and potential future use, cut across those more conventional aspects of value. Notions of recreational, aesthetic and local economic value, cultural history and multiple benefits tended to be discussed in an engaged and elaborate manner, while value perceptions related to biodiversity, specific species and nature more broadly were often, especially in the interviews, expressed in somewhat formulaic ways. Importantly, our participants' articulations of value were grounded in broad push for 'more'—a desire that management interventions should be identified which could develop the use of the woodlands in some way.

3.1 | Valuing biodiversity

Interviewees articulated appreciation of the flora (mentioning distinctive broadleaf tree species such as oak, birch, alder, sycamore) and fauna (red deer, roe deer, pine marten, red squirrels and Scottish wildcats). They expressed a broad sense of valuing biodiversity, using words such as balance, and articulating an interpretation that a mixed or diverse forest life showed whether an environment was healthy. In terms of the specific biodiversity and conservation value of the woodland, most interviewees discussed plants, animals and butterflies in very broad terms ('It feels lovely knowing that there are special species of butterfly there so close to us', Resident 1), and expressed unspecific appreciation of 'the woodland in general and wildlife, birds and all the rest of it...' (Resident 2, who, when asked for more detail responded 'nothing that you don't see everywhere else around here... Just all the usual suspects'). Residents were aware of the important butterfly populations, and some of our study participants were able to speak in detail about particular species of flora and fauna, although they offered little commentary on lichens and mosses for which the woodland has conservation designations, even when asked:

Interviewer: The lichens that are here, what do you make of them?

Resident 8: I know absolutely almost nothing about them, they interest me because they are prolific and you get these lovely masses of stuff growing on branches of trees and you get some quite interesting little ground ones as well growing on shrubs, that are not like the big grey hairy bits on the trees. I don't know whether they are of great interest to people, I think they probably are if they come and have a look at them, I don't know what they are.

By contrast, workshop participants, many of whom had ecological or land management expertise, pointed to specific management interventions that could benefit or damage biodiversity and habitats for butterflies as well as lichen and bryophyte assemblages. Workshop participants were broadly supportive of management for conservation aims referring, for example, to the butterfly populations and 'people from all over the country coming to photograph them' (Workshop participant 1). They also articulated the tensions inherent in biodiversity management in the woodlands in question, discussing the challenges of trying to encourage natural regeneration while not wanting too much shade from trees or bracken that might crowd out lichens, butterflies and wildflowers.

3.2 | People's experience of nature: Recreation and aesthetic value

Another common response referred to aesthetic and experiential aspects, in particular, the use of the woodlands for recreation. Many of the residents expressed that walking was the major way

that they experienced the woodlands, and spoke about experiencing the peace and quiet, enjoying the views, as well as activities such as mountain-biking.

I do go for walks... because it's a very beautiful glen, but I don't have any views whatsoever about what is there, other than enjoying the trees... (Resident 5).

The value that interviewees placed on recreation and aesthetics was also clear in visitors' responses:

What they didn't like about the walk is that they didn't get "a real feel of the loch", as there isn't a good view of it from the trail, and you can't really see it through the trees (fieldnotes, visitor 6).

Both interviewees and workshop participants expressed a sense of the forest being overgrown, 'impenetrable', 'inaccessible', 'a jungle', 'uncared for' or 'wild', or of tracks being hard to find, which acted as a barrier to them fully enjoying the site:

To be honest, there's only small portions of the forest around here that are really accessible... [...] if there weren't deer running around [creating deer tracks] ... you would not be able to move, you literally couldn't get through; it's impenetrable in places (Resident 1).

Workshop participants expanded on these perspectives and argued for increasing recreational opportunities through management interventions such as new footpaths. They linked improved access with benefits such as improving mental health and well-being for a greater number of people, and creating opportunities for people to connect with nature. Some workshop participants, however, pointed at the tensions that could lie in such improved access, and suggested that a lack of accessibility could also be considered beneficial, referring, for example, to their enjoyment of a sense of wildness: 'that unmanaged feel was something that I really liked' (Workshop participant 3).

3.3 | Economic opportunities: Provisioning ecosystem services

Workshop participants and interviewees emphasised the importance of social and economic benefits they felt could, or should, be created. One interviewee felt there was a conflict between environmental protection and a more productive perspective, indicating unease with an exclusive conservation focus: 'I think that there needs to be a balance between maintaining these environments and actually using the woodland' (Resident 1).

The principal economic benefits discussed by interviewees and workshop participants related to tourism and hospitality, important industries for the local economy. Another economic benefit

identified was timber production, albeit expressed with reservations about the negative impact of forestry (where this involved conifer plantations and clear-felling) on landscape aesthetics, and on quality of life caused by heavy vehicles on small roads. Opportunities for skills development, job creation and greater direct economic benefit were highlighted in response to questions about perceptions of the site, particularly by those who lived locally:

I think it is good to see resources used sympathetically and to create value that helps to sustain rural communities. We've already spoken about young people; they just leave and it's hard to get people to come back. There are some who want to stay and want to have a rural life, and so how can you help them to do that? How can you create employment opportunities?... is there scope to use this resource in a way that would help generate a few opportunities? (Resident 4)

Other opportunities such as a possible small hydro-electric scheme, extracting firewood and 'coppicing, green woodworking, biodiversity surveying' (Workshop participant 2) were identified as alternative land uses that might provide paid employment (as opposed to volunteer opportunities) and bring financial benefit to the local area, alongside observations that managing woodlands for solely for conservation purposes only created a very small number of ranger-type jobs.

3.4 | Managing for multiple ecosystem benefits

One consistent theme from interviewees and workshop participants was that the woodlands should be managed for multiple benefits. Some interviewees argued that existing management systems seemed to focus on only one aspect (e.g. conservation; or economic opportunity) and were keen that the sustainability of forest management should be considered across social, economic and environmental concerns.

Not everyone's interested in nature, I know that, but I think they could do with increasing the [visitor] numbers a bit, 'cause I think the more people you can encourage to an area, it has a knock-on effect. It creates a lot more money in the area and it means we get better facilities as locals. It's a huge knock-on effect, all these things, and encourages people to get out and cycle – keep your heart healthy... (Resident 7).

Indeed, some participants felt plantation forestry areas should be designed with future recreational users in mind, planning for trails and access within woodlands grown primarily for timber. The challenges of managing woodlands for multiple benefits were tangible in conversations. Interviewees highlighted what they understood to be conflicting management perspectives by different landowners, and pointed to the

challenges of seeking to increase visitor numbers and thereby potential economic benefits to the wider local area, while also trying to maintain the tranquillity of the woodlands, itself a woodland benefit and attraction for people.

Yes, it is a fine balance. It is a very fine balance, but then there are a lot of tourist-related businesses here, so it's not an easy issue to work through, because there are people on both sides – the people who come here and live here because it is quiet don't want any more tourists and then there are the people who are dependent on that for their livelihoods (Resident 4).

Similar concerns about the potential for increased activity levels to negatively impact people's enjoyment of the woodland were expressed during the workshops, but workshop participants also indicated that creating more engagement activities would have indirect co-benefits on the wider area. Managing for multiple benefits was also felt to be challenging against a background of resource limitations and the need to meet legal obligations for managing the woodlands given their SSSI status. Workshop participants emphasised the importance of ensuring diversity and equity of access to the woodlands, and suggested that greater community-led decision-making and involvement in woodland management could deliver additional benefits both for the woodlands and the local community.

3.5 | A 'development' perspective

Looking across our material it was striking that study participants frequently articulated a 'development' perspective, whereby a place such as these woodlands could not just remain in a given state: there was an implicit onus to develop and optimise the use of the woodlands with respect to a wide range of uses, including recreation, education and timber, although people were also cautious not to argue for overuse. Interviewees and workshop participants were keen that more people should be encouraged to visit—linking increasing visitor numbers with small-scale economic opportunities (e.g. for local cafes) and with anticipation of additional benefits for those visitors through recreation and greater connection with nature.

There was also an undercurrent of wanting to 'do more' with the biodiversity. For example, Workshop participant 6 discussed opportunities for greater connection with nature through events based on exploring the woodlands and encouraging children to take their family back for more. One couple (Resident 3) suggested creating a 'walk through the Sites of Special Scientific Interest or whatever' which would be 'really lovely', while stressing they did not want to commercialise the area, a caveat that was important to the workshop participants as well (see above). Finding the right balance to promote development 'at a sensitive level' (Workshop participant 4) led participants to make concrete suggestions that would increase accessibility and direct use of the parts of the woodlands that were close to the car parks, while leaving the rest

of the area as a 'wild space for biodiversity' (Workshop participant 2). However, even these more inaccessible areas could be used as 'a space for young people to go on immersive, connective programmes, where, to generate a connection to rural place, wild place, and to learn skills which can enable employment in the rural environment' (Workshop participant 2).

Despite a small number of annual visitors (approximately 2800 visitors/year), interviewees and workshop participants thus made hopeful statements about the potential of the woodlands to be a place enjoyed by more people. Although our research questions did not probe such issues directly, our study participants thereby indicated a strong sense that supporting and contributing to additional benefits, even in a small way, was an important opportunity to make more of the woodland, in addition to any conservation needs.

3.6 | Drawing on the past: Integrating narratives of historical ecosystem services

Interestingly, arguments made in relation to developing and deriving multiple benefits from the woodlands regularly relied on stories of historic and cultural uses of the land. One of the principal reasons managing mainly for conservation benefit was considered problematic was because our study participants expressed a strong sense of connection with the cultural heritage of the woodlands; a sense of human interaction with the landscape throughout history, and of humans being integral to shaping the woodland ecosystem to provide for their needs. Discussion around managing for multiple benefits often came from narratives of past use of the woodland:

I think that humans have shaped this landscape since humans first set foot in here. The first thing they would have done is start taking trees down and changing the environment around them and this notion of leaving stuff in a natural way I think is bogus, I don't think it is natural, I think it's unnatural because the one factor that it doesn't take into account is humans, the dominant species in the area who actually have shaped this landscape for hundreds of years and are now not allowed to touch parts of it (Resident 1).

Areas of the woodlands in this study were previously coppiced for charcoal production, and one of the trails includes an information panel telling stories of a historical incident that occurred nearby shortly after the Jacobite Rebellion in the mid-1700s. Other interviewees pointed to more recent history, when there used to be a hotel and more tourist attractions in the glen, thus bringing more visitors to the area; told stories of people who previously kept livestock in and around the woodland; or suggested using the site's historical narratives in a manner similar to those represented in the popular TV series 'Outlander' to attract visitors. Such considerations were grounded in a feeling that managing for conservation meant trying to avoid any human impact in the woodland. As such, interviewees expressed concern that managing

exclusively for conservation would detract from any potential future benefit for humans:

And I think if something has historically been coppiced you can't just say 'right, that's it', because it makes a complete mess. Instead of having trees you've got this overgrown mass of stuff that nobody can walk through and eventually animals can't use. So if something has been coppiced in the past, I think it should continue to be coppiced. And you've also got a market for the material (Resident 6).

Workshop participants tended to consider the past also from an ecological perspective. They were more ambivalent about reviving historical practices such as charcoal burning as they argued that this might have negative effects, for example, on the lichen assemblages, and could detract from opportunities to engage children in learning about the woodlands and the values of 'the ecology, the lichens, all the species that are there' (Workshop participant 6). On the other hand, people 'using the woods again' was argued to be important for creating connections with nature and ultimately enhancing the importance of conservation through those connections:

I like the idea of people back in the landscape, using the woods again. And I think if you don't get people on board and get people supporting the importance of these sites then there's a danger that they do get forgotten about (Workshop participant 5).

Overall, our study participants thus regularly drew on narratives of past benefits to humans from the woodland to argue for future use.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our findings indicate how residents and visitors emphasised values and ecosystem services that benefitted humans, often relating to their own direct or indirect experience of woodlands. This ties with the findings of other studies (De Vreese et al., 2019). While broadly supportive of biodiversity-related management aims, interest in the species found in the woodlands tended towards more visible species such as butterflies. With the exception of ecological professionals, our study participants were vague in their descriptions of biodiversity, and felt that the woodland should be managed for multiple benefits, in a way that benefitted the local community, even if only to a small degree. Participants appreciated the recreational use of the woodlands, frequently identified in larger surveys as the major use of woodlands (e.g. Forest Research, 2021), but also argued that other, more material opportunities should be increased.

While our workshop participants with ecological and land management expertise had, unsurprisingly, much more developed views on biodiversity and its management than other study participants,

our findings show that their ideas concurred with respect to the other themes emerging from our study. Of particular interest, narratives around economic opportunities from the woodlands were often couched in stories of past land use and cultural history. Knowledge that the land was previously coppiced to support local industry, and emphasis that the woodlands have been actively managed in some form for hundreds of years, created an indication that leaving woodlands to grow naturally, or with no management interventions, might in itself be unnatural. These stories of past land management emphasised what was seen as the role for humans as part of nature, and as beneficiaries thereof. Our research thus also highlights our study participants' ideas of the importance of humans in co-producing both ecosystems and ecosystem services (Fischer & Eastwood, 2016).

Participants referring to the cultural history of the woodlands were not necessarily drawing on their own memories. Instead, they related to times long gone to give meaning to the woodland today. Not everyone aspired to reinstate those historical practices—some of the workshop participants argued against this—however, even for these participants, cultural history still informed their ideas of the woodlands as a place. For some, stories that involved humans were driving connection to nature almost more than stories of nature itself. Our findings thus suggest that not only directly experienced, but also storified historic engagement plays a big role in connecting people with, and creating meaning of, nature (Skoglund & Svensson, 2010).

The emphasis on the active involvement of humans with a place also links to recent debates on the relational nature of values and the values inherent in human–nature relations (Chan et al., 2018). These debates emphasise that values arise out of and are situated in specific relationships (though the nature of these relationships can take many forms) and that it is relationships that provide meaning, as well as having meaning (Himes & Muraca, 2018). The importance of relationships as a prerequisite for valuing and understanding the woodlands was also evident in the weight our study participants gave to access and recreational use (Section 3.2). Considering that our interviewees' responses often remained somewhat bland and formulaic where they spoke about the biodiversity, one possible conclusion would also be that to strengthen relational values associated with 'hidden' biodiversity especially, people have to be given the opportunity to build such relationships—be it through guided walks that facilitate encounters between local residents and local nature, or other means.

Some of the interviews and workshops were characterised by a 'development' discourse that implied that optimisation of human use of the area was imperative, linked to the notion of humans as an integral part of, and as an active force in shaping the landscape, a finding that resonates with recent studies on the active role of humans in co-creating ecosystem services (Fish et al., 2016). Interviewees and workshop participants also articulated awareness of the tensions between the desire to develop and gain additional benefit from the woodlands, and a sense that limits were needed, something that participants found difficult to put into words. Whether the notion

of limits was grounded in an implied awareness of the necessity to manage resources sustainably, or a fear of being overwhelmed by increasing tourism levels experienced elsewhere (Brooks, 2019), remained unclear. However, participants recognised that some of what they valued about the woodland was the sense of it being unique or set apart in some way, and indicated that increasing the 'use' of the woods thus might harm the very essence of what made it special. Discourses of development such as the one identified here may be difficult to detect through participatory ecosystem service assessment approaches that focus on categories of services (Agbenyega et al., 2009), as notions of development and 'optimisation' cut across such categories. However, tensions between an implicit development imperative and concerns about overuse have also emerged as important factors in other studies of woodland management in the UK (Eastwood et al., 2017).

5 | CONCLUSION

Our study explored the perceptions of, and values associated with, a place of high conservation value in a rural area, where this conservation value manifests itself in relatively inconspicuous species, species assemblages and habitats. We found that while our interviewees tended to recognise and respect this value, it seemed to remain rather vague and bland for them. Instead, they discussed instrumental values associated with recreation, landscape aesthetics and local economic benefits in a much more passionate and in-depth way. Workshop participants, many with ecological expertise, pointed more explicitly to the importance of conservation values, and discussed challenges of managing habitats for conservation. However, overall, our findings thus suggest that managing for conservation alone might cause challenges in acceptability, especially where species and habitats conserved might be of little obvious value to the non-specialist.

The development discourse identified emphasised benefits to humans above other species or indirect ecosystem services, albeit within limits. In this sense, both interviewees and workshop participants largely echoed the anthropocentric focus of ecosystem services and similar concepts. While recognising and emphasising multiple values in their relationships with the woodlands and the need for balance between different uses and benefits, this value mostly excluded the special needs of the cryptic biodiversity for which the sites are designated. Unintended by us, our study thus supports the conceptualisation of 'nature's contribution to people' (Pascual et al., 2017) as a description of ecosystem benefits that reflect the perspectives of our interviewees and non-ecologist workshop participants.

Some of the people we spoke with had lived or worked in the area for many years and were keen to share their knowledge, while visitors were more focused on just going for a walk. Local knowledge is important in understanding the opportunities for different land management practices and the creation of ES; adding knowledge of cultural heritage can enhance opportunities for the co-production

of ES, as well as help understand why local people might be more or less supportive of conservation aims (Guibrune et al., 2021). Our findings thus align with calls for the conservation movement to place greater emphasis on social aspects of biodiversity conservation to recognise greater diversity in the knowledge and value framings placed on nature (Pascual et al., 2021). Our analysis implies that conservation actors also have to engage with constellations where values related to direct utility are dominant—even where, such as in our study site, these are not reflected in commercial value but rather in small-scale, local social and economic benefits. Such engagement could entail active 'listening' (Staddon et al., 2021) to these values and discourses of local development, but also a co-constructed critical reflection on these.

Our findings highlight the opportunity for further in-depth study to understand the networks of influence and management preferences. While our findings show residents' and visitors' perspectives, including local participants with ecological expertise, further in-depth research with land managers and stakeholder organisations is important to understand the synergies and areas of difference that create further dynamics of land management for areas of high conservation value.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

A.F. and A.B. conceived the idea for the research; A.F., A.H., A.J.-B., A.B., A.E. and S.H. collected the data. A.H. and A.F. analysed the data; A.H. and A.F. led the writing of the manuscript, to which A.J.-B. and A.B. also contributed. All authors gave final approval for publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm there are no conflict of interest in this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data on which this research is based are archived securely at the James Hutton Institute. To preserve confidentiality and research participants' anonymity as promised in the context of the participants' informed consent, the data are not made publicly available.

ORCID

Alice Hague  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4874-7050>

Anke Fischer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0034-3690>

Anja Byg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9311-9526>

Alba Juarez-Bourke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4069-2067>

Scott Herrett 0000-0001-6409-6986

Antonia Eastwood  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0175-7780>

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