

Healing hands

The Swedish philanthropist on coaxing a desolate landscape back to life

IN summer, cattle from the Fersit farm roam freely up Strath Ossian and out onto the high pastures of Corrou, where the old shieling sites can still be seen. The ancient tradition of transhumance has all but died out in Britain, but here, in the heart of Lochaber, it's once again being practised, allowing livestock to fatten on the sweet hill grasses before heading back to their lower winter grazings.

Lisbet Rausing, who has owned Corrou for nearly 25 years, is passionate about the benefits of traditional farming practices and her commitment to reviving the rich biodiversity of this wild terrain is already reaping rewards.

An academic and ecologist, she grew up in the southern Swedish province of Skåne, where childhood holidays in the 1960s were spent running barefoot and roaming free on ponies, living off the sea and land and listening to her grandfather's memories of a country proud of its 'pleasant, orderly parsimony'. In her elegiac book *Our Skåne*, Lisbet describes the rural idyll of the estate he bought before the Second World War and how the area's 'ancient farming landscape was ripped to pieces' in the interests of 'improvement'.

Her grandfather played a role in this, as he tore down old buildings, fenced and sprayed to create his ideal model farm, but Ruben Rausing was a moderniser typical of his generation. It was his love of progress that led to Tetra Pak, the food-packaging company that made the family fortune.

'Even as a child I knew how spurious the arguments for the destruction were,' writes Lisbet, and that sense of loss has haunted her ever since. With farming in her blood—'all Swedes basically come from farming stock'—and a knowledge of science and the environment, she's channelled her interests into initiatives such as Ingleby Farms and Forests, a sustainable farming company

that owns and manages more than 247,000 acres in nine countries and, with her husband, Prof Peter Baldwin, founding conservation charity Arcadia, to which they have granted more than \$500 million (about £380 million).

The co-author of an impressive history of Corrou, Lisbet feels a strong affinity with the north of Scotland, where poverty combined with natural riches and a 'sense of place, community, rhythm, and work' existed, as in Skåne, within living memory.

‘I don't see a contradiction between ecological interests and country sports’

In her quiet, considered manner, she talks of her first encounter with the Highlands, on a riding holiday in the 1980s. 'Sweden has similar vast landscapes where people have long gone to ramble or write, track reindeer or enjoy less intensive sports, such as grouse shooting, but they're managed quite differently; all the mountains are commonly owned.'

In Scotland, where one individual can control thousands of acres (Corrou extends to some 57,000), visionary owners such as Lisbet are gently, lovingly—and with the involvement of the

local community—teasing the denuded landscape back to life. It's a long-term project, but the message is catching on: 'There's a lot of interest in rewilding, from commercial buyouts, traditional landowners, the Forestry Commission (FC), farmers; I feel there's a warm and positive attitude.'

'I don't see an intrinsic contradiction between ecological interests and country sports. By culling to below five deer per square kilometre, we're getting heavier stags with better heads. Wild stalking may be tough, but it's exciting.'

In the 1960s, part of the estate was sold to the FC, which replaced 8,650 acres of ancient woodland with a shroud of pine and spruce. 'We were lucky to buy back Lower Corrou,' she says, explaining how much of this diseased monoculture has now been cleared and native woodlands planted. With sheep removed and deer numbers reduced, wildwoods are reverting; grouse numbers are up, red squirrels and hedgehogs have been reintroduced and scores of birds, insects and plants are returning.

Collaboration with bodies such as the John Muir Trust and the FC is key. Lisbet singles out the latter, with which she has a long-term project to restore ancient peat bogs. 'Everyone agrees mistakes were made 50 years ago, but our experience of them is good and they're extremely knowledgeable.'

Indeed, her guiding inspiration is the FC's founder, the conservationist and pioneer of planting

in the wilds Sir John Stirling Maxwell, who bought Corrou in 1891. Here, among the ice-borne boulders of a terminal moraine, he planted an alpine garden and arboretum beside Loch Ossian, 60 acres of Himalayan rhododendrons and, higher still to 1,700ft, pioneering conifer plantations.

In Stirling Maxwell's day, guests alighted at Corrou Station and sailed five miles up the loch by steamboat. I walked, fortified by venison stew at the station house that Lisbet has transformed into a welcoming mountain refuge. The new Corrou Lodge, rising through trees at the head of the loch, is a silvery vision of glass and granite—one of the boldest new houses in the Highlands.

With this state-of-the-art shooting lodge for entertaining in the wilds (it's available to rent), 12 full-time, plus seasonal, employees, renovated staff and holiday cottages, re-established stalking beats and miles of restored hill tracks—walkers are welcome—Corrou feels like a modern reincarnation of a Highland estate. There's even new Victorian-style kennels by architect Ptolemy Dean, who designed the Ghulbinn powerhouse 'in homage to the stern, neo-Classical architecture of the 1930s hydro buildings'.

With four 'run-of-river' schemes, Corrou generates enough electricity to power the estate and sell to the National Grid; for the first time, it's breaking even.

When I suggest that she's at the vanguard of a new Green movement transforming the Highland landscape for the benefit of all, Lisbet's response is modest: 'My family and I are just one small part of a broad and popular movement to heal and animate Scotland's beautiful landscapes, so that they once again become a cherished patrimony. What is so exciting is that we're all coming together, helping each other—it's a privilege to engage in that.'

Mary Miers

For the record

What is your favourite place in Britain? The High Weald of Sussex—and Corrou

Favourite building? Wadhurst Park, East Sussex

Favourite book? Primo Levi's two-volume autobiography *If This is a Man* (1947) and *The Truce* (1963)

Favourite music? Romani music

Favourite food? Christmas pudding with brandy butter

Hero? Those who fought and those who fight political extremism

Ideal dinner guest? Jane Austen

Alternative career? Landscape architect

