



The Saving of the Forest: story and place

Like nature itself, the diversity of living traditions like storytelling must be conserved, whilst also being allowed to grow, explains Alette Willis.

I got my start in storytelling in Scotland as a Talking Tree with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE). This was nine years ago, just after I had moved here from Canada, bringing with me a keen interest in storytelling and environmental education and some stories from the north-eastern woodlands of North America, but little experience as a teller. When I joined, the Talking Trees had been around for a decade, the inspiration of Ian Edwards who had witnessed the use of storytelling for education in other cultures. A draft of his collection, *Tales from the Forest*, circulated around the group [1]. I learned all its stories by heart and set out to find more native Scottish tree tales.

One of my best discoveries was *'The Saving of the Forest'* in Judy Hamilton's *Scottish Myths and Legends* [2]. With the hero shape-shifted

from warrior to child, it became a favourite in my RBGE repertoire. In this story two goddesses, Beara and Bride, take turns ruling over ancient Scotland. Bride, the beautiful goddess of summer, is loved by everyone. Unsurprisingly, Beara the fierce goddess of winter does not get such a friendly reception. One summer, overwhelmed by jealousy, Beara sends a witch to destroy the Caledonian Forest. From her hiding place in a huge storm cloud, the witch throws balls of fire down on to the trees, setting them alight. The people of the land do their best to contain the blaze, but their warriors are unable to kill the witch - hidden as she is - and the threat to their beloved forest grows. It is a clever little girl who saves the day, with her idea of separating all the baby animals from their parents. The resulting neighing and bleating and crying is so loud and plaintive that the witch fears

something lurks below that is more formidable than she is. She sticks her head out of the cloud to get a better look and a warrior pierces her through with his spear, saving the forest.

Safeguarding our stories

The concept of the Caledonian Forest is a bit abstract for most of the young people I tell to. But in their mind's eye, each of them carries their own personal forest, gleaned from their experiences with trees, from school, television and even other tales they have heard. It is these forests I aim to connect to.

When I tell, my own imagination is fed by all the forests I have known and loved, from the woodlands of Ontario and Quebec to the temperate rainforests of Vancouver Island, and more recently, the Caledonian Forest. In 2010, I walked the Speyside Way from Buckie to Aviemore passing through the Anagach Woods and the Abernethy Forest, both native woodlands, although the former was planted in the eighteenth century.

With Scotland's native temperate rainforest all but gone and forests everywhere under threat, *'The Saving of the Forest'* presents a useful starting place for discussing the importance

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of forest ecosystems culturally and biologically, while invoking a collective orientation of care towards them. Narrative types of knowledge, as embodied in stories, are ideal for conveying emotions and teaching empathy. While technical knowledge is good for instructing on how to do things, stories help us to care enough to do the things that need doing and protect the places that need protecting. Sharing stories is also a lot of fun. When telling *'The Saving of the Forest'*, I invite the audience to shout out animals that would have been around back then. We puzzle over the specific words for males and females and their young (a female squirrel is a doe, who knew!?). At the story's climax, everyone picks an animal and on a count of three, at the top of our lungs, we make their noise. The resulting cacophony is thunderous as we voice our collective care for the forest!

Oral storytelling is a form of intangible cultural heritage, which since 2003 has been 'safeguarded' by a UNESCO convention [3]. The turn towards safeguarding intangible cultural heritage marks a change in orientation for UNESCO, most famous for designating World Heritage Sites, which in the UK are mostly about protecting cultural heritage, with only three designated for natural heritage. But intangible cultural heritage offers another way to understand how culture and place are intertwined. Beara is also known as the Cailleach, whose stories dot

Previous page, left to right: Uath lochan; Inshriach tree. Above, left to right: Two sides of Inshriach forest; Walking in Anagach woods.

the Highland landscape. According to folklorist Stuart McHardy [4], the Cailleach is a creator goddess; amongst other places, her name is associated with the burn, Allt Na Cailliche, near Callander, and the Beinn na Caillich hills in Skye and Knoydart. It is in Scotland that the Cailleach is seen as the other face of Bride [4]. However, it is in Ireland that the Chailleach Bheara stone is found, linking the two names to the one figure [5]. There is, of course, passionate debate as to whether the Cailleach originated in Scotland and travelled to Ireland or vice versa. But clearly, while her name is attached to specific places, her stories move around. As for *'The Saving of the Forest'*, Judy Hamilton locates it in Badenoch, but it too has travelled and changed.

Storytelling road trip

In December 2017, I decided it was time to get to know the eponymous forest that needed saving. A web-search brought up Inshriach as the place to find remnant Caledonian Forest in the district of Badenoch. So I enrolled my husband and poodle in a road trip. It was a calm, crisp morning when we pulled up on the Forestry Commission Road: to the right, a dense plantation of Sitka spruce, to the left a much more open woodland made up mostly of birch and Scots pine.

We headed up the forestry track, the smell of spruce evoking the west coast of Canada even as we looked out over a remnant piece of uniquely Scottish habitat. Despite the cold, the open woodland was alive with birds and their songs. A mixed flock of crested

tits and blue tits followed us for a while. We paused at Uath Lochans (the hawthorn small lochs) to drink in the stillness, the frozen surface of the water pitted like steel. A red squirrel scolded us from a distance.

As we walked back to the car, I reflected on folklorist Jack Zipes' observation that stories are always (re)created out of bits and pieces that already exist [6]. Following the trail left by Judy Hamilton, I had come here to find the place of *'The Saving of the Forest'*, only to discover Inshriach is made up of bits and pieces of old and new landscapes, reminding me of other forests I have known.

UNESCO recognises that forms of intangible cultural heritage, like storytelling, are living traditions and that safeguards must conserve diversity while allowing for growth, development and even the emergence of entirely new forms of practice. Nature must also be safeguarded to preserve diversity while enabling adaptation to the changing conditions of climate change. Bringing the two together, storytelling becomes a valuable learning tool that enables us to re-imagine places of care, helping us to save our beloved forests, past, present and future.

References

1. Ian Edwards, *Tales from the Forest*. RBGE: Edinburgh. 2011
2. Judy Hamilton *Scottish Myths and Legends*, Lomond Books: New Lanark. 2003
3. The UK is not one of the 175 countries that has ratified this convention. However the Scottish Government, along with Museums, has adopted the concept.
4. <https://stuartmchardy.wordpress.com/articles/>, accessed 21/12/2017
5. Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 2009. Birlinn Ltd: Edinburgh
6. Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Princeton University Press, 2012

Alette Willis has a PhD in Human Geography and Environmental Studies. Her version of 'The Saving of the Forest' can be found in Dancing with Trees: Eco-Tales of the British Isles, written with Allison Galbraith (History Press, 2017).