

## Custodians of our woods deserve our gratitude now more than ever before

If you know who looks after your favourite forest, encourage them to enter Scotland's Finest Woods Awards 2021, says **Angela Douglas**



Woodland walks have been a lockdown lifeline for many people – myself included – at a time when pandemic restrictions have limited what we can all do with our lives.

It's rare to speak to anyone within walking distance of a wood who did not spend time there during the first lockdown. Many of us then travelled further afield when allowed to do so, perhaps finding woodlands we never knew which have now become our happy places.

No-one doubts that woodland walks (and forest forays) have been extremely good for both our physical and mental health during this strangest of times, as the coronavirus pandemic dominates our lives. Yet do we ever stop to think about the people who create and look after these wonderful woods as we walk through them?

From experienced professional foresters to hard-working and passionate community groups, people the length and breadth of Scotland put their heart and soul (and their hands and feet!) into making our forests and woods accessible, beautiful, and magical. A well-known saying I'm fond of is, "a society grows great when old men plant trees under whose shade they know they'll never sit."

More than ever, in the current climate, we want to reward these efforts – and that is what we do with Scotland's Finest Woods Awards, an annual celebration of excellence, sometimes referred to as Scotland's Tree Oscars!

The awards celebrated their 35th anniversary in 2019, but the pandemic restrictions imposed shortly before our entry deadline in March 2020 meant judges could not visit sites to assess them, an essential part of the process of only awarding prizes to genuinely high-quality entries.

The cancellation of the Royal Highland Show, where the friendly and celebratory Finest Woods awards ceremony takes place, meant we had to take the difficult decision to cancel the 2020 pro-

gramme. But we're back with a bang in 2021, with the return of all our regular awards, plus a new Climate Change Champion Award, to highlight the vital role of trees and woods in securing a positive environmental future for us all. In the year the global environmental summit COP26 comes to Glasgow, it seemed a perfect opportunity to introduce the new award.

It is open to every entry made to all other categories – three Quality Timber awards, two for Community Woodlands and Farm Woodland and one each for New Native Woods and Schools. The Schools award is always a highlight, superbly demonstrating the amazing work of nurseries and schools in introducing children to the wonder of woods.

The winner of the Climate Change Champion prize will show excellence in mitigating climate change, adapting woodland to the changing climate or sharing knowledge and information about the subject.

I'm delighted that CarbonStore, which links those seeking to plant trees with businesses seeking to offset carbon emissions, will sponsor the award, and hugely grateful for the expert support of Forest Research in developing the award to the highest standard.

Personally, I'm very excited by the new award, and the fact that the programme is back for 2021. I really hope that everyone who benefits physically and mentally from our forests and woods, not just walking, but running, cycling, bird-watching and much more, will think carefully about the effort that goes into making those woods special, and the people who put that effort in, often over many years.

If you know who they are, please encourage them to tell their story, share their passion for woods and enter Scotland's Finest Woods Awards 2021. In these strangest of times, they deserve our recognition and gratitude more than ever. Full details on how to enter at [www.sfw.co.uk](http://www.sfw.co.uk)

**Angela Douglas is Executive Director, Scotland's Finest Woods**



Scotland's Finest Woods Awards

# Funding vital to halt climate change

Institute hears improvements in affordability and connectivity are vital from former transport minister, writes **John Yellowlees**



The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (UK) Scottish Region (CILT) was privileged recently to hear from Sarah Boyack MSP who was Scotland's transport minister at the dawn of devolution.

A town planner by profession with both local authority and academic experience, her interest is at the strategic end of the planning spectrum, focusing on ensuring that housing has the right linkages into transport networks.

In 1997 Scottish Office minister Malcolm Chisholm appointed her to the National Transport Forum, and on being elected to the first Holyrood Parliament she found herself alongside party leader Donald Dewar as minister for Planning, Transport and the Environment.

Sarah had no deputy minister or special adviser, so she worked with civil servants, who were very talented but with an inheritance of mainly road-oriented projects. The new government had a host of aspirations also for rail and bus, but the civil servants were clear that she was going to need additional funding. So along came consideration of road-tolling, congestion-charging and workplace-parking levies, all provided for in the first Transport Act. A visit to Norway revealed that tolls there were to raise money, not to tackle congestion and discourage car travel as had been her aim, and in the face of opposition cries about highway robbery she was forced to retreat from tolling which had evoked a newspaper headline "On your Boy-ack", while congestion-charging would be rejected by the voters of Edinburgh in a council referendum.

With hindsight she had been trying

to do too much too soon, and the clear lesson was that especially in transport you have to take the voters with you, with better alternatives and affordable choices available first. Major investment for rail was given the green light, and she created a bus priority fund and promoted free travel for the over 60s. Local authorities could apply for funds to encourage walking and cycling. Priorities for the first budget were buses, ferries, potholes and key roads. The transport budget had overall doubled by the time she left the post.

Through the next two decades Sarah's views of transport were to be from an environmental perspective. In that time there has been a reduction in the cost of motoring and a substantial increase in bus and rail fares. Climate change has now grown into a full-blown climate emergency where there will have to be a focus on transport. Edinburgh has serious air quality issues which its City Mobility Plan seeks to address, and even in the pandemic the City Bypass and the M8 are jammed with cars.

Action is needed globally now since the effects are visible everywhere, and the impact is disproportionately on lower-income groups. The Stonehaven derailment and repeated closures of the Rest and Be Thankful show the need to retrofit our infrastructure.

Covid-19 has prompted heavy support to public transport networks in offsetting the loss of income, and there will be a need to make better arrangements taking account of people's new-found taste for working from home.

Scotland's response will have to include accelerated action against climate change in anticipation of COP26 while recognising the need to keep public transport going. The enthusi-



asm in lockdown for cycling has continued into the autumn, but to sustain this there will need to be dedicated cycle routes and spaces.

Cycling will also fare better if there are improved links into public transport, and for now it might be easier to keep on their bikes people who gave up on public transport because of the pandemic.

Transport's share will have to be fought for since everywhere there will

be competition for investment. Winning people back to public transport will require political commitment. The Scottish Government should not just fund ScotRail, but own it. Strong funding support and improvements in affordability and connectivity are vital so that buses and trains may join with walking and cycling in the fight against climate change.

**John Yellowlees, Scottish Chair, CILT**

↑ Sarah Boyack pictured in Edinburgh while she was Scottish transport minister launching a paper on a new Transport Bill.



## Like the virus, climate change continues to rage across the globe

But amid the despair opportunities exist to build a better future, says **Fiona Buchanan**

We were all so eager to put 2020 behind us and embrace the new year, but as January draws to a close we're discovering that the days ahead are going to remain very tough. Many more lives have been lost to Covid-19 and the current lockdown has no end in sight. As cases of Covid-19 soar the pandemic remains a major worry as does the uncertain roll-out of the vaccines globally.

Throughout the pandemic the climate crisis hasn't disappeared, and remains a crisis, indeed an emergency. And for millions of people in vulnerable parts of the world, climate breakdown compound everything. Whether it be floods in Asia, locusts in Africa or storms in Europe and the Americas, climate change continues to rage. Like the virus, climate change is a threat we

cannot afford to ignore. To put it bluntly: we've got work to do. But amid the despair, what opportunities exist to build a better future, one that places the values of inclusion, solidarity, and justice at its heart?

At Christian Aid, we hear first-hand from those living on the frontline of the climate crisis. In Ethiopia, where 2020 saw prolonged periods of drought coupled with heavy rains, the erratic weather means life is harder for farmers like Mekonnen Sofar: "The drought and the climate change affect me in both resources that I have. The first is farmland, it's not productive. And second, the livestock. They die out with drought and also the remaining will go to the market to be sold to buy food. So, I'm affected in different ways." His family have benefited from a Christian Aid programme which is focused on build-

ing resilience for vulnerable communities experiencing climate extremes. This includes being part of a weather 'listening' group which sends detailed short and medium term forecasts to their mobile phones so they can plan accordingly. But the forecast for the next few months isn't promising.

The good news is that, like the vaccine for Covid-19, we do know how to fix the climate crisis. We need to keep fossil fuels in the ground, boost clean energy investment and help those who are suffering on the frontline. The only way to solve the crisis is for rich countries, like Scotland, to urgently reduce their emissions and to support those communities which are living with the impacts. This year, in Scotland, we have a unique opportunity as the UK prepares to host the crucial UN climate summit (COP26) in Glasgow in

November. As thousands of people from across the world come together to push governments on climate ambition, we hope that the talks will offer a chance to amplify the voices of grassroots and indigenous communities, to unlock progress and to drive levels of ambition across the world so that tangible outcomes are achieved. If we act now, we can build a better world, where everyone, including Mekonnen, can flourish. Coronavirus has disrupted our lives

in an unprecedented way. Now we face a choice – we can go back to business as usual, perpetuating the climate crisis and growing inequality. Or we can become campaigners for climate justice and take positive strides towards a healthier, safer future. Find out more at [christianaid.org.uk/Scotland](http://christianaid.org.uk/Scotland)

**Fiona Buchanan, Campaigns and Advocacy Coordinator, Christian Aid Scotland**



## Secular 'gods' are failing so many in the time of Covid

The number of enquiries about the Christian faith is growing because our contemporary gods are no longer helping people to navigate these difficult days, says **Gavin Matthews**

There are no true atheists! In reality everybody worships something. This was pointed out by the Pulitzer prize-nominated secular writer David Foster Wallace who said, "Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, then you will never feel you have enough... Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you... Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

When people are under pressure their responses can be revealing about who their true 'gods' are. Sometimes the thing we fear losing the most is what we have actually been 'worshipping' all along. The current crisis has put several of our contemporary gods under the microscope. One of the reasons many churches across the country are reporting a spike in enquiries about the Christian faith is because of the failures of these secular 'gods' to satisfy or help them navigate these difficult days.

While vaccines have been hailed with almost messianic enthusiasm, the deification of the pursuit of longevity fails every test that David Foster Wallace set out. As wonderful as science, vaccines and the NHS are, if our response is to cheerfully roll-up-our-sleeves in order to avoid facing the truth of our mortality, then we've taken

a spiritual sedative with our viral inoculation. The truth will still be waiting for us when we awaken.

The 'god' of perpetual economic growth is another popular deity whose credentials are looking shaky. The economic shocks of pandemics, lockdowns and our exit from the EU should concern us all. However, they will shake to the very core anyone whose 'worship' consists of the accumulation of things.

The numbers of people investigating the Christian faith at the present time can be interpreted in several ways. CS Lewis famously wrote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." By stark contrast, naturalistic atheism stunts the quest for answers to 'why questions', saying that there are no answers to be had; things just 'are'. Meanwhile, religious systems that picture God as distant, detached or uncaring don't meet the heart cry of the suffering, and karmic systems which blame the victim for their suffering are hard to swallow when a loved-one lingers on a ventilator.

But what I personally continue to find compellingly attractive is the character of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The God who knows vulnerability, who lived with us, suffered and died with us – yet was raised to life again. He holds his arms open to a broken world; to any who will come to him for forgiveness, meaning, purpose, peace, joy and eternal life. And the hope he gives doesn't crumble when tested by pandemics or recessions but shines ever brighter in the darkness.

**Gavin Matthews for Solas**



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