

Extinction in the Small Isles

An investigation through photographic practice



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On a grey Saturday evening in August 2022, seven PhD students and one researcher from the University of Leeds rolled off the train at Mallaig and onto a waiting boat, the *Mary Doune*, for the start of a week-long photography field trip to Knoydart and the Scottish Small Isles. Under the expert guidance of Colin Prior, an award-winning Scottish photographer, we were there to explore extinction through the craft of visual communication. With a base at Doune Knoydart, each day Andy, skipper of the *Mary Doune*, took us across the seas to remote locations including Loch Hourn and the isles of Rum, Eigg, Muck and Pabay.

This collection is a small sample of what emerged from our varied experiences over that week, bringing together images of, and reflections on, our encounters with extinction, loss and change. What you are about to experience are some of our partial reflections from the rich, multisensory world of the Small Isles.

We invite you to share in our exploration over the following pages, to follow our footsteps and see through our eyes as we examine extinction through the lenses of our cameras.





Earthworks

Alfie Howard

*A tiny life is quietly entombed,
Concretion 'round a body now unknown.
An ancient mollusc, rotting through the years,
Made earthworks, ramparts cutting through the stone.
The carcass of a boat with missing ribs
Lies resting, ghostly in the light of day;
And like the ruined croft upon the shore,
A lobster cage's turquoise ropes decay.
The nettles and the colonising swamp
Consume its buckled frame, and through the rust
The ox-eye daisies dance, and on the beach
The dead are shot then slowly turn to dust.
And all of us that live are vital grime
Concreting on the battlements of time.*



For many people, the appeal of western Scotland and the Hebrides lies in the idea of wilderness – of pristine natural landscapes, craggy mountains and remote beaches untouched by human feet. Like most places with this reputation, western Scotland and the Hebrides have been inhabited by humans for several thousand years, and most of the islands that we visited still have permanent populations. The photogenic concretions in the Bay of Laig, for example, are only a few hundred metres from a church, a post box and a tea shop that acts as a collection point for the wonderful Eigg taxi service.

On these islands and peninsulas, it is difficult to escape the evidence of conflict – conflict between humans and non-humans, in the form of the old lobster traps, scuppered fishing boats and working trawlers; and conflict between humans and other humans, in the form of Bronze Age fortifications and – much younger, though they don't look it – the remains of homes that were abandoned during the Highland Clearances. These lands are undoubtedly beautiful, but they are not pristine, nor are they untouched by humans. And anyway, it would be impossible for me to take a picture of a place where there were no humans, because I myself am a human, and I would be there, taking

the picture. To get the photographs shown here, I rode over the waves on a motorboat, trampled across heather, scrambled over barnacles. I didn't just have to *be* there to take these pictures; I had to *get* there, and that is an act in itself. In searching for a wilderness that doesn't exist, we can forget who we are and what we are doing. That is one of the greatest dangers of the modern world.

There is another image, taken on the final full day of the trip, which I tried to incorporate into the poem above, but I couldn't do it in a way that didn't feel contrived or nonsensical. The image is of a white horse standing on a beach on the isle of Muck, where the sand and seaweed-covered rocks meet the bright blue water. There was something strangely calming about seeing it. Not that the horse necessarily looked friendly – in fact, all my photos of it were taken with maximum zoom, as I was reluctant to get too close. But it looked quite content, standing at the intersection of sand, stone and sea. It wasn't somewhere you would expect to see a horse, but there it was, being a horse. Of course, I'm projecting; perhaps it wasn't content at all. But it was certainly beautiful.



Kenyan conservationist Dr Mordecai Ogada writes about the contrived landscape, the desire to recreate a pristine natural environment free of human presence. Illustrating the point at a recent seminar, Dr Ogada noted the tendency of photographers to capture landscapes with no people present, often digitally removing evidence of human interaction post-production. That comment, made as part of a larger discourse on the deep colonial roots of conservationism, stayed with me, and I found myself reflecting on it on the boat trip to Doune, in Knoydart, for a week-long photography field trip.



As amateur photographers, we so often strive to recreate evocative landscapes, beautiful but barren vistas, suggesting a vast space where our minds and souls can soar. We scabble around, shifting positions, crouching down to obscure a stranger walking into shot. Capturing moments that aren't real, memories that aren't accurate, moments that we never truly witnessed. It is perhaps unsurprising that those same tendencies bleed through into our attitudes towards conservation, with many advocating for an imagined ideal. This feels particularly relevant here in Scotland, with an active discourse around rewilding.

It isn't immediately clear to me how this field trip will be useful for my project - my PhD looks at experiences of environmental grief in climate change activism and grassroots activists are, understandably, reticent about being photographed. This raises the importance of consent and, with it, questions. If we commit to taking images that are real, are we then creating images that cannot be easily shared? How can we acknowledge presence in the absence of consent? I don't know the answers to those questions, but I make a commitment that first day to find ways to weave presence and absence together in the images I take. To find absence more authentically.

Back on the boat, Tom, a member of the group, mentions research suggesting people often remember less about an experience they have photographed, than one where they leave their cameras behind. I wonder what that might mean for me, and others like me. People with trauma histories often experience difficulties with memory. It can be difficult to hold onto moments that feel benign, that lack the teeth of trauma. My own moments are slippery, so taking photographs became a way for me to retain some control over my own narrative. I have no way to know if a significant moment will be one that sticks or skims, in the years to come, so for a long time it felt safer to err on the side of caution. In recent years, since qualifying as a psychotherapist, I have become far more comfortable with the concept of 'not knowing'. Without really noticing, my anxieties about gripping onto moments has lessened. This has freed me up towards capturing images that interest me, rather than those that communicate something. In loosening my grip on my story, perhaps I am loosening my grip on the trauma that takes up space in my mind.

We spend large chunks of the week on the boat. I have travelled around Scotland a lot, over the years, but seeing Scotland from the sea provides an added perspective,

The Authenticity of Absence

MT Talensby

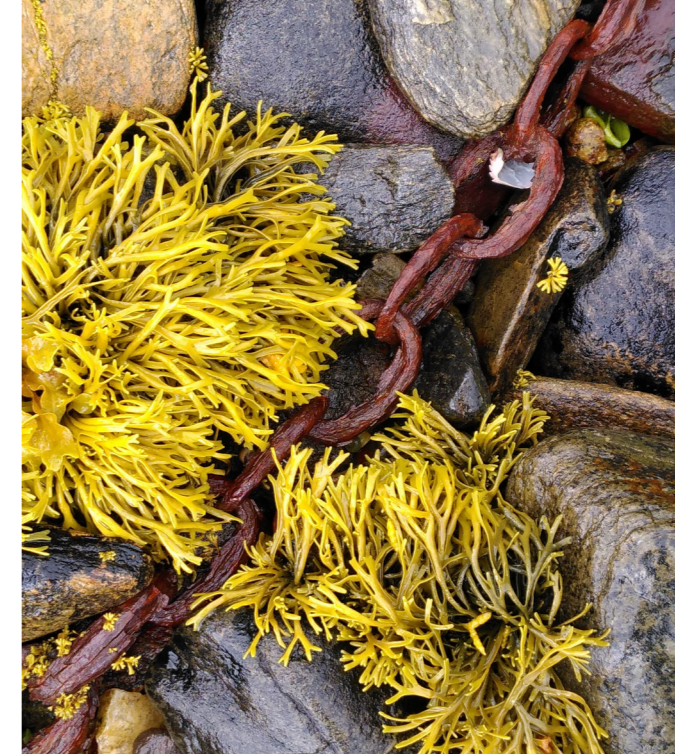
a deeper layer to my relationship with the place I have called home for over 40yrs. We see dolphins, sea otters, a sea-eagle. A juvenile Minke Whale comes under the boat and surfaces alongside us. I, who have spent most of my time on dry land, am struck by how alive the sea feels, yet Andy, our skipper, talks of how much emptier these waters have become in recent years. The relevance to my project becomes stark as Andy reflects on how he has been able to see things most people only see on screens. We talk of how people view the world and how distance could influence how they see and experience climate change.

Our boat, the *Mary Doune*, is named after the woman who helped set up the current community in the 1980s, with her family and the ruins of a cottage. Now in their 80s, Mary and Alan are still on Doune, but we don't see them during our visit. They are mostly housebound now, their absence a presence that holds weight for the other families. Mary and Alan hope to see out their final days in the island community they created, a poignant and understandable desire, but one that is only possible with the accord of others. Life, and death, on the islands requires community and consent. This has significance for Andy, who is soon to retire after 30yrs running boat trips from Doune.

Thanks to Andy and Tom, who gave consent for comments and images used here.

I ask how he feels as this phase of his life comes to an end and he talks passionately about what he will miss, of the group trips that bring him to remote islands. He talks, too, about what retirement might mean for his life in this remote part of Scotland. For Andy, life on Doune is a privilege, but one that is fragile and finite.

Presence and absence. How we curate our worldview in the images we observe and create. I find myself back at the start, considering the ways we navigate in a world of loss, loss of place, loss of memory, loss of self. Loss of presence in photographs. On the day I see a Minke Whale, I take photos of a whale carcass on Rum, bleached white by the elements. I am more drawn to the absence than the presence. The loss than the life. I think again about my relationship with memory and photographs, of the shift from control to curiosity. Perhaps this is also true of Andy, in getting comfortable with the inevitability of loss, perhaps he has freed himself up to experiencing his life more fully. Perhaps by allowing presence and absence to weave together more fluidly, we can better notice what is made visible when something is lost. Perhaps we can be more present, more intentional, more deeply connected with ourselves, each other, and our environment.







The Entangling Sea

Jonathan Roberts

Travelling across Knoydart and the Small Isles by boat – the *Mary Doune*, skippered by Andy and Dave – is a powerful reminder that the sea has always been a pathway. The roads, where they exist, wind their leisurely way around bays and headlands, but the boat takes the more direct path across the waves. Travelling by boat from the coastal hamlet of Doune to ruined crofts and ancient brochs lends an immediacy to the knowledge that the sea links each bay and islet along the coast.

The sea not only enabled our travel, but also shaped our routes. Some days, with the wind against us, we were forced to abandon our plans and choose from among the possible routes which the sea had gifted us.

The sea is an ecosystem; it is the entanglement and interaction of countless organisms, some too small to see, some as dramatic as the dolphins who sported in the waves as they investigated the *Mary Doune*. The sea, and the chemicals and organisms that compose it, shaped our journeys and experiences, just as it shaped the forms of the fragments of driftwood and smooth pebbles we met with on the beach.

The sea reaches across time. Those fragments of driftwood, shaped by the organisms that fed on them and the sea that bleached and eroded them, tied us to the time of their abandonment to the waves. The crofts, now entangled in the most physical sense with the roots of heather and bracken reaching through their ruin, linked us to the history of the crofters. The trauma of the crofters, forced from their homes and betrayed by their chiefs, seemed embodied in the croft's lonely forms and empty doorways, sheltering plants and insects as they endlessly awaited the return of those whom they were built to shelter.

The sea too reflected a profound sense of loss. Just as the empty houses signified lost people and a lost way of life, we marvelled at the wildlife – shearwaters, dolphins, gannets, whales – in an awareness that the populations of many of the species we admired were crashing. There was a time when people might not have shared our giddy excitement at seeing whales and eagles, and there may yet come a time when visitors will, in our guide Colin's phrase, 'be excited to see a seagull'. The sea became a mirror, reflecting back our sense of loss on a dying planet, just as the ruined crofts reflected the loss of human communities, linking us to pasts and possible futures through mournful absence and joyful presence.

The soundscape of the sea linked us too to everyone across time and space who has listened to the roll of rocks drawn across the beach, the playful splashing of the waves among the boulders, the trill of the oystercatcher and the cry of the gull. The music of the birds is instinctual, but also chosen; the birds choose when to call just as the musician chooses when to play, and the rolling of the waves and the rushing of the wind complete the soundscape. Speculation is not history, but it is tempting to imagine seafarers through the ages listening to past iterations of this multispecies

music, unique in every moment, composed on the fly by a different cast of individuals and species each day.

The seafarers left their marks on land and sea, in burial mounds of Viking kings as in rotting lobsterpots and abandoned rope. Each of these has been colonised by other species; barnacles and bracken exploiting the habitat which humans have left them. Each heather-clad croft, now hosting bees and butterflies, stands testament to the entanglement of human and nonhuman.

We participated in our own, rather less romantic, entanglements with the ticks and midges, whose bites physically connected us not only to themselves, but also to the deer and sheep on which they normally fed. We crafted our own host-parasite interactions, as we adopted increasingly rigorous attempts to foil their feeding as the week wore on – that failed to entirely prevent their biting but certainly created new challenges for our unlooked-for companions.

The sea, the ruins, the wildlife and the parasites: each entangled us, reaching across time, space and species, as we explored our place in a world of encounter and interaction. Throughout it all, the entangling sea carried us onwards, and we watched what the waves would show us.





Awe and Extinction

Sicily Fiennes

As we coasted through the foggy waters of western Scotland, it had me pondering my biases toward the natural world. Until now, the indescribable awe of seeing a rare seabird or a cheeky cetacean friend such as a common dolphin or minke whale is incomparable to seeing an unusual plant or lichen. I'm as guilty of this as the next person; I'm a recovering conservation biologist who'd probably feel more suited to the field of political ecology by now. However, many people in their natant discipline of conservation biology have made the awkward and uncomfortable divorce from an area so intimately rooted in colonialism and whiteness.

Some wildlife I'd only seen for the first time during this trip. Even though I know not everyone finds extinction sad, I couldn't help but feel a deep sadness and loss that I might never see a golden eagle again or watch a pair of otters frolic in molten waters in the morning sun.

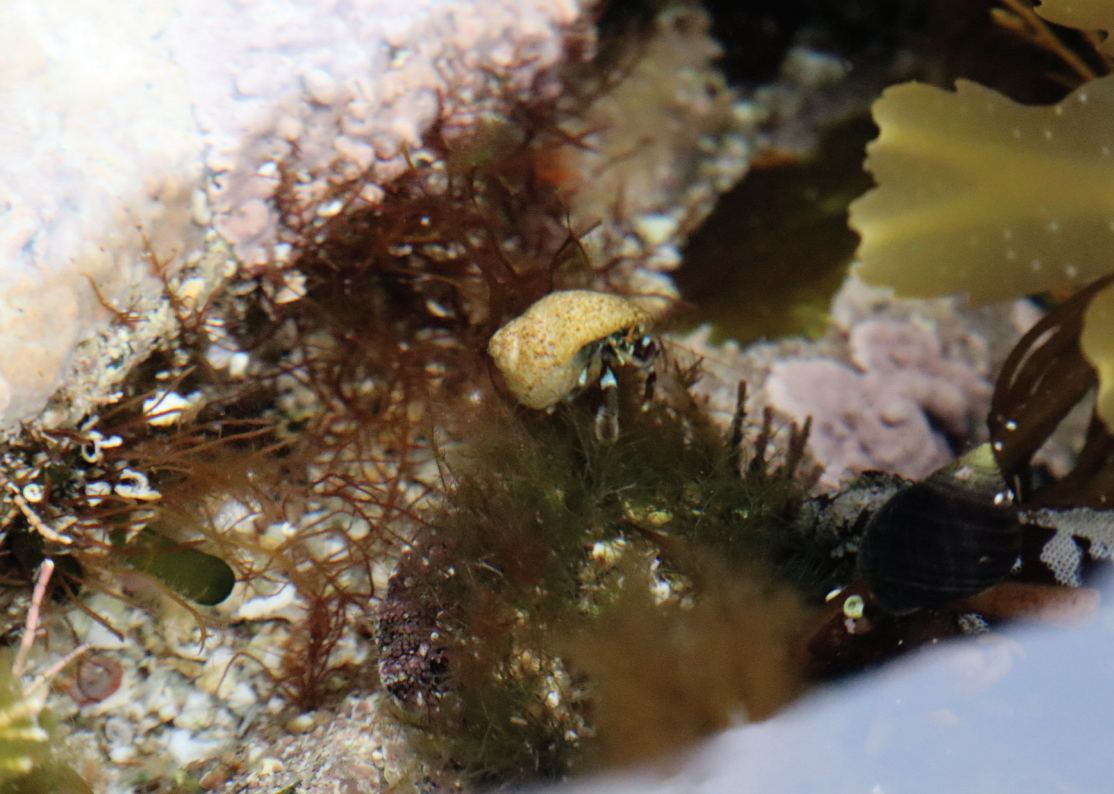
To quote J. Drew Lanham from an article in Orion Magazine: 'Humans have always looked skyward for inspiration, imagining themselves unbound by gravity or the weight of oppression. Flight means freedom.'

When I look up to the sky and catch sight of a bird, something lights up inside me: awe, joy, a separation from our stressful existence. A recent study from the University of Sheffield warns of the homogenization of diversity – species becoming more alike. It is thought that for birds, we'll see more boring species as we lose the more striking, awe-inspiring birds. To begin with, this revelation felt bland, colourless and full of grief. However, after gaining a more intimate understanding of photography from this trip to Scotland, I indulged in the glory of taking a picture of what I might have previously considered mundane; a rock, a small piece of lichen, my dark reflection in a rockpool or a simple daisy.

On this trip, we had many discoveries of lichen, fungi and what we thought was a sighting of the elusive slime mould. I crept on my stomach along some stones to take what felt like a treacherous photo of two mating dragonflies. I was absolutely mesmerized by them; what I've learnt most is to follow your individual curiosity; your perspective will be different to everyone else. That difference is what I think makes photography so nice as a research practice in itself.







Small Isles Reflections

Lydia Woods

'A lot of people can take photographs, but not many actually take the time to notice.'

This quote, relayed to us by photographer, Colin Prior, rattled around my mind as I gazed into the depths of a rock pool, my reflection rippling back at me in the Scottish sea breeze. Given four hours on a remote island beach, we had no choice but to roam very slowly, in awe of the vast number of marine and coastal species. The littoral biodiversity was enormous, and the slower I moved the tinier things I spotted. Forms of algae, sea squirts, sponges, chitons, molluscs, bryozoans and more.

Resting for a second to investigate a mysterious finger-like green algae, I noticed subtle movement in the corner of my eye. It was a common periwinkle (*Littorina littorea*, Linnaeus 1758) scooting along the rock at a reasonable pace. If it wasn't for having multiple hours specifically assigned to curiosity, I never would have noticed. Slowing down, zooming in, framing the world through a camera lens and patiently observing. I noticed stripes along the snail's soft body as it began to twist itself in contorted ways, antennae stretching out. This was a creature that in my research I would consider as a pixelated node in a

computational food web. Most trips to the beach I would consider it an empty shell, littered among thousands of its dead relatives. But here, in front of me, the periwinkle is full of vibrant mollusc charm, manoeuvring around its environment with a quiet elegance. Such sights remind me that biology is a lot more than facts on paper.

Moving to another pool with the same intent focus, I watched a miniscule hermit crab (likely, *Pagurus bernhardus*, Linnaeus 1758) rummaging through the sand, feeding on invisible particles with its blue striped appendages. The relentless fervour to feed itself drove home the constant necessities of sustaining life. How mesmerising the crab's methodical movements were, with the vibrant hues of its articulated exoskeleton. Colours that once dried would fade, once dead would bleach, and once fossilised would become something else entirely. I thought about the traces organisms leave behind. Fossilised shells and bones; a few tangible fragments of what were complex ecosystems, buzzing with long-forgotten colour, sound, movement and smell. Colin took us to see a minke whale skeleton on a beach, on Eigg. Incredible to witness, I wondered how long dead the whale was, with its bleached bones lying static among the rocks. The next morning, as

if to show us what they are truly like, a live minke surfaced by the boat, and those enchanting few seconds instilled in me an entirely new perspective that could not be achieved by staring at bones alone. It was a small window into the gigantic magic of a living, breathing whale - something that cannot be described in words.

Sadly, we learned that like all natural landscapes, the Small Isles are under threat. Stacks of bird bones lie along the strandline from avian flu, the fish stocks are intensely depleting, and the weather patterns rapidly changing. After barely a week spent in and around Knoydart, I gained such a renewed wonder for the very largest to the smallest organisms. When any species is lost, not only do we lose the functions it provides within ecosystems, but also its unique colours, movements, smells, and sounds. As much as I enjoyed being temporarily stranded on Scottish islands, it is the skill of observation that I will take away, and investigate the natural wonders in my own back garden before it is too late.

Awe. I struggle to think of aperture or composition, or what to cut out of the frame. I am overwhelmed. “Look for what speaks to you.” It is good advice. What if everything speaks to you? What if the mountains sing and the lichens chime and the moon calls you onwards and gives you butterflies? Which stories do I choose to tell? What do I cut out of shot?

I start with the stories moving in slower time, akin to Roy’s (2017) ‘tree time’: I fill my camera lens with lichen near the shore’s edge. Crustose lichens grow slowly, perhaps 1mm a year (Gilbert, 2004), living in a timescale even slower than tree time, not as incomprehensible as deep time. Lichen time is incremental and long: It grows old, living here for hundreds of years. Around it, violent changes in weather, coastal erosion processes, people. It lives as fungi and algae in symbiosis on this rock throughout it all. I choose the photo where the fruticose lichen looks strong and wizened.

We move locations and it is raining. Bad for camera lenses, great for lichen. I spot lichen with huge lobes, a striking feature in the miniature landscapes on tree trunks and rocks. This is a lungwort lichen: In south-east Britain, lungwort lichens experience regional extinction. Here, the air remains clean enough, the lichens resist extinction.



Photography as a Tool for Enhanced Interactions

Serena Turton-Hughes

I resist the urge to move. Examining intermingled mosses and lichen, looking for those that speak to me, forces me to quiet and slow down. Not quite to lichen time, but enough to spend time with the lichen and stroke the mosses. I interact with lichen in this time. Showering ‘green walls’ (Knapp, 2019) in attention and taking tens of photos, I hope to frame the individuals and community as stars of the show.

I slip out of my lichen time. I do battle with my labelling brain: ownership and power. My untrained eye is tempted to label ‘wilderness’. To equate awe with ‘untouched by humans’. Our skipper for the week tells me that the original inhabitants of Doune Knoydart were forced from the land in 1853. I learn, piece by piece, of The Clearances. From Andy’s snippets and a little reading on the side, I come to realise we might now term The Highland Clearances a cultural extinction: Gaelic banned from schools; clan leaders kept purposefully busy away from their people; the ejection of those living on the land for centuries in favour of sheep farming; and pieces of ‘legal’ paperwork to say a wealthy man truly owns that land. I am reminded of *terra nullius* in colonial Australia, a term used to claim land without inhabitants, empty land.

Except it wasn’t empty or unmanaged. I am reminded of *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (Ghosh, 2021) and the repeat pattern of colonisation, still occurring. Andy tells me they found bloodstone arrowheads on Rum dated back 7,000 years. Jon and I explore an abandoned dwelling on the hillside of Loch Houran. A long history of human entanglements. Now time: I choose to keep the canoe in my shot.

I flit between now time and slow, careful attention. I increasingly turn towards trying to show more-than-human agency: the power of lichens as pioneer species; birds bringing treasures, foreign invaders, nutrients and noise. I watch a group of oystercatchers, their cries like squeaky dog toys; their run, comedic. Now time: I capture a shot of two birds, taking flight after I startled them. I wonder at photography as interspecies interaction.

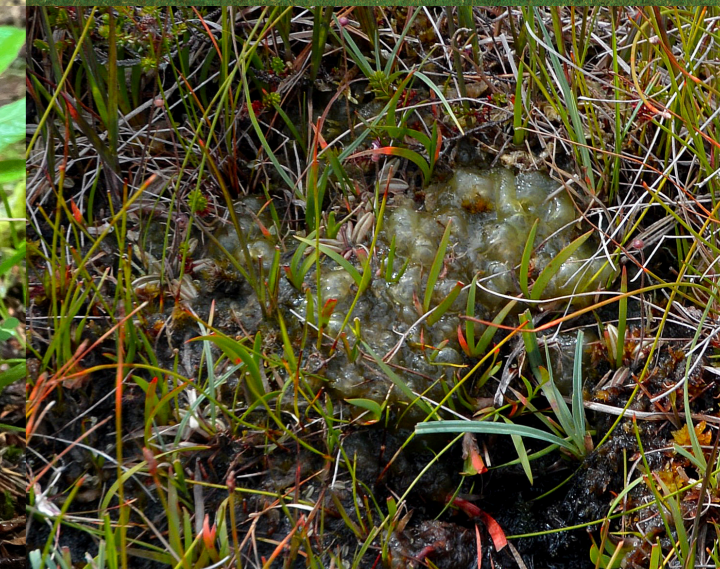
On the Isle of Rum, I hunt for the less-noticed, my back to the sea and the picture-postcard views. I find slime, several species enmeshed within. I poke it. I know what it’s not, but I don’t know what it is. Friendly enthusiasts in an online community group point me to it, with the help of my photographs: *Nostoc*, cyanobacteria. I wonder at photography as a web of interactions with enthusiasts.

I pay more attention to excrement as a playful way to say this place is more than pristine, more than ownership, and more than human-managed. I include dung in my visual messages, cut *into* the shot. I find fruiting fungi. I wonder at the power of the camera as a way to enhance interaction with harder-to-spot species, showcasing the liveliness of excrement and soil. I remember the recently discovered fungi in Cairngorm soils (Mackenzie, 2022) and wonder how much is yet undiscovered.

Jellyfish and ctenophores surface: reminders of other worlds I am blind to. Atlantic coral flung to a grassy headland of Muck. How much we’ll never know. I look for the entanglements of species with one another: life brought by decaying corpses of the recently deceased. The flashes of orange and black as carrion beetles get to work on a lifeless badger, not so lifeless.

I try to take a shot from the perspective of a snail.

Awe. I struggle to think of aperture or composition, or what to cut out of the frame. I am overwhelmed. “Look for what speaks to you.” What if everything speaks to you? It seems interacting with more than humans is where powerful entanglements happen and connections grow. Interaction brings mosses out of the ‘green wall’; lungworts out of epibionts. Stroke that moss, photograph that lichen. Trying to identify mystery species, with the aid of my camera, I become more invested in communities of enthusiasts, located around the world, connected in joys of fungi, lichens, and mosses. Extinction of experience (Pyle, 1993) leads to ceased opportunities for live, organic interactions, personal to the individual: a loss for both sides. Interaction resists muteness, allowing a degree of agency on both sides. For me, it seems photography enhances interactions. Providing I can find what speaks to me.







Microcosms

Jenny Kennedy

The beach at Pabay is a montage of colours. There are thousands upon thousands of shells, from the earthy reds of what were once snails to the chalky white of clams' husks. And it was here that I spent an entire morning, entranced by the many patterns – smooth spirals, curling contours and sharp lines.

Scotland's west coast landscape was as I imagined – deep narrow inlets bounded by jagged mountains. It was not for the lack of material and inspiration that I failed to capture the true vivacity of the Scottish landscape. Rather, a lack of experience, equipment and skill rendered my images flat. Abandoning the idea of capturing the perfect panoramic image, I turned my attention to miniature landscapes. Focusing on the rich minutiae that I had often overlooked, I spent my time concerned with the smallest details.

On Pabay, there was so much natural detritus the sea had washed up. The many shells that had once been part of living creatures, some of which had eked out an existence in the ocean's depths while others traversed the shoreline. Photographing them, I saw not only the husk of an animal, but I also imagined what they once were, how they might have moved, and where in the ocean they might have lived.

Other debris came in the form of washed-up seaweed in earthy colours of red, orange and brown. One piece of seaweed, burnt orange, was punctuated with specks of red and had a fleshy appearance that resembled the jaw or tail of some strange mythical sea creature.

On one of the Scottish Small Isles, Eigg, I encountered glaring green seaweed juxtaposed with rock formations covered in patches of yellow and orange lichen and asymmetrical patterns, giving an otherworldly appearance. And there was so much to see within this landscape – impressions of the earth's past in the form of a shark fin fossil; testaments to life's dynamism in the multitude of rocks pools that teemed with life; and reminders of death's place within the cycle of our existence as seen in animal remains. For some, animal skeletons are an ugly aspect of a landscape that should be ignored. For me, they are a potential subject, even in their grotesquery. And although the seabird I captured likely died of natural causes, photographing its carcass reminded me of the ongoing avian flu, which has been hitting seabirds hard and causing devastation in several important colonies in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK.

Throughout the week, I learned how to use my camera. I played clumsily with aperture, shutter speed and ISO. Imperfectly, I practised how to arrange and capture the visual elements in my frame. I learned how to study detail, appreciate it, and attempt to capture it. But mostly, I learned how to see microcosms that often go unnoticed.



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