

## Let's go back to the la country's ills

WEATHER

Edinburgh 13.2°C



[0 comments](#)

Published on 14 Jun 2011



COLETTE  
DOUGLAS-HOME

### Could Scotland's ills be cured by a pile of logs and bags of nails?

I think so. There's a campaign to build 1000 huts in Scotland's forests: to offer 1000 families the opportunity to have their own small roof in the great outdoors. I have only one objection to the plan: why not 100,000?

Go to Ross-shire, Inverness-shire, Sutherland – any county you choose – climb a hill, gaze across unpopulated wilderness and listen to the echo of long lost communities. Thousands of people lived there before the clearances, before industrialisation.

Why shouldn't they do so again – if only for weekends and holidays?

Scotland is well balanced in terms of population and land mass. Many more city-dwelling families could have access to a rural hut without spoiling the landscape.

Now that's an aspiration worth the name.

If the Nationalist Government has the vision to deliver a scheme like that, it would earn its re-election. For a simple hut can enrich family life. And enriching family life can transform the country.

I know from experience what a country bolt-hole offers. When my children were growing up we were fortunate enough to have a two-up, two-down cottage.

I lost count of the Friday nights when work pressure, exam tension, or just the claustrophobia of town living had us all strung out. I can tell you what we did there – the picnics, the days at the beach, the snowball fights and hill climbing on days so windy that we could hang forward on the peak.

What's harder to put into words is what beauty, big skies, quiet and fresh air do for the psyche and for the soul. There are few problems that don't shrink out of doors. A place where time is measured by the season speaks to something deep in us.

Not too many generations ago we came from the land. Our grand-parents and great grandparents worked it for a living.

It's part of us and we need little reminding of that.

For Ninian Stuart, director of Reforesting Scotland (the charity behind the 1000 huts campaign) the physical challenge of building a hut proved a healing process.

When stress challenged his mental health, his remedy was to build his own hut in the woods.

He said: "The joy of learning to build a small structure was healing. It cost under £1000 and I discovered skills I didn't know I had."

There are three strands to his initiative which will be launched tomorrow.

He says: "There is the beauty and value of having a hut in which to get away from it all. There is the potential for the people of Scotland to build with wood from Scottish woodlands and there is the potential to build huts for people to stay in, in the simplest way."

My daughter stayed in a Norwegian hytte. It was grass-roofed, had two bedrooms and an open plan sitting room/kitchen. A trap door in the floor concealed a natural larder.

There was a soil lavatory, an open fire, no central heating and sporadic electricity.

Her friend's family holidayed with no television or electronic games. Instead they walked, watched elk and skied.

It is an inexpensive lifestyle commonly enjoyed across Scandinavia, Russia, Czechoslovakia and Canada. Why not here?

Moving back into the countryside enriches people. It broadens their knowledge and understanding. Literally it grounds them. It gives them a rural focus from which will spring new initiatives and ideas to make the countryside viable. It's a win-win concept.

At the moment Scotland's planning restrictions prohibit sleeping in huts. But the rules are sometimes predicated in a statutory need for councils to provide expensive infrastructure. Common sense can find a solution if people agree to living lightly.

The benefits can't be exaggerated.

A city dweller who buys a country cottage reduces the rural housing stock and makes rents unaffordable for the local population. Weekending in a hut boosts the local economy. Hut dwellers support the pub, shop and local eatery.

Scotland has an epidemic of alcohol-related illness.

Hopelessness is a measurable factor in shortening lives in parts of Glasgow. Children in our towns and cities are penned in by tarmac and traffic. Too many spend their weekends in front of a screen eating junk food, when they could be cycling, hiking or just learning how to identify trees or to tell a squirrel from a hedgehog.

Vast tracts of Scotland are for sale at the moment.

The market is awash with Highland and Lowland estates.

It would be good to see a move to reserve a few acres of each one for holiday huts.

If making it compulsory is too draconian, an incentive scheme could be introduced – tax breaks for example.

Setting aside land for huts within easy reach of the urban population is even more important. The Forestry Commission is an obvious starting point.

But Ninian Stuart wants to encourage other landowners to get involved. It's not just that hut owners bring economic gains, there's also the joy of seeing people reconnect with the land. In his experience there are few downsides for the landowner.

The Falkland Estate, with which he is connected, welcomes between 100,000 and 200,000 visitors a year and, he says: "Very few even drop litter. If people see a place that is cared for and loved, most fall into line."

If I were Alex Salmond I'd take Stuart's initiative and run with it.

Independence is a big idea but for most Scots it's an intellectual theory. Surely it would be more meaningful to give people a physical stake in the land from which they sprang.

There's nothing simpler than a hut but multiplied by 100,000 it's a move that is big enough, bold enough and brave enough to change the way Scots feel about their country.

Because political discourse in Scotland is focused on urban centres, we sometimes forget that in the countryside ownership of land and its use remain a crucial issue. With a pile of logs and bags of nails, we could hammer out a solution.

### What do you think?

We want to encourage intelligent discussion and debate on HeraldScotland so we need a few rules in place. [Please read them here before posting your comment.](#)

And please note if we don't know you well then your comment won't go live until we've had a look at it. Outside office hours that may take some time so please be patient.

Showing 0 comments

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

0

heraldscotland

©Copyright 2011 Herald & Times Group. All rights reserved.

#### Our News Services

Mobile  
Newspaper  
Digital Editions  
Back Issues  
Online Archive  
Email, Twitter, RSS  
Syndication

#### Our Advertising Services

Family Notices  
Book Your Newspaper Ad  
online  
Contact the Sales Team  
The Facts and Figures  
View Newspaper Ads

#### Our Personal Services

Help, Feedback & Contact  
Dating  
Travel Services  
Photo Sales  
Crosswords & Sudoku

#### Our Colleagues

Evening Times  
s1  
Scottish Farmer  
TGO  
Newsquest Media  
Group

#### About Us

Herald & Times Group  
Terms & Conditions  
Privacy Policy  
Employment