THE NATURE CONSERVANCY
12 Hope Terrace, EDINBURGH, 9
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Your reference:

9th June 1966.

J.D. Menzies, Esq.,
East Lodge,
Bridge of Gaur,
Rannoch Station,
Perthshire.

Dear Mr. Menzies,

Thank you for your letter and questions about Rannoch Moor which I will attempt to answer, though some of them are questions that we would like answered too !

The question of peat development and growth rates is a very complex one, and as you probably know the main factor leading to the growth of the blanket bog in the first place was climatic (supposed to be at the onset of the wetter Atlantic period c.700-500 BC). It is thought that an annual rainfall of at least 40", and high humidity, are necessary for a bog to be maintained or continue developing, but human factors (grazing, burning, draining) have accelerated peat erosion, so that even on Rannoch where the rainfall is 50-60" per annum, a good deal of the bog is receding, especially on the sloping ground and drier morainic knolls (but is probably still forming in the wetter hollows). I wouldn't like to say which process is winning ! If you want some accurate details on all this, and rates of growth, I suggest you write to S.E. Durno at the Macaulay Institute for Soil Research, Aberdeen, who has done a lot of work on the subject.

As far as we know, the maximum development of pine forest over the Moor was about 5,000 years ago, declining with the onset of the peat, but scattered trees persisting on the moraines. Presumably these suffered from the general clearance of forest from Roman times onwards (evidence - your discovery of old furnaces). The last trees may have been used in the construction of the railway in the 1890s. I would have thought that the ground would have been too wet for a general conflagration, and any burnt layers would have been due to local fires - but no one has studied this, and it would be interesting to know whether there is a very extensive burnt layer at a consistent level in the peat. This is more likely to be present towards the Black Wood or other areas where the forest was more extensive in historic times.

The moraine on Rannoch Moor appears to be of local origin, and we presume that most of it was left behind by the retreating ice which was more in the form of a wide ice-sheet rather than an actively eroding glacier. However, I expect there was some movement and formation of moraine during the early stages of glaciation.

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I'm sorry to give such vague answers to your questions, but really very little work has been done on the Rannoch Moor bogs. You might find some useful information in the new Vegetation of Scotland (ed. J.H. Burnett, 1964) if you can get hold of it - or from the Scottish Peat & Land Development Association whose secretary is Mrs. N. Tomter, Norwood, Woodend, West Lothian.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy J. Gordon

Miss N.J. Gordon
Regional Officer
for Northern and Central Scotland