Eden 3 dialogue: Duncan McGregor (2007)

Eden 3 dialogue. Transcript from the Collins & Goto Studio files, archived 2026.

DUNCAN MCGREGOR

INTERVIEWED BY

REIKO GOTO AND ANNE DOUGLAS

17 APRIL 2007

[ ] Text in square brackets should be checked for accuracy or spelling (for example, names) or for choice of words.

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TRACK 1

Anne Douglas: How do you define the difference between a native plant and a non-native plant?

Duncan McGregor: That is a good question. I would say a native tree would be one that wasn't introduced till ... You would have to say that it will be a tree species that has always existed in this country since the Ice Age – so, you are talking of about 10,000 years ago. The native tree species that are present in Scotland have always been present in Scotland since the last ice age – so they have been present here for about 10,000 years.

It is only species that have been introduced, and how you can tell what species have been introduced is sometimes very difficult to quantify.

Anne Douglas: Is there a dictionary?

Duncan McGregor: Of species?

Anne Douglas: Yes – how can Reiko find out about it?

Duncan McGregor: I think if you were to go onto Google you would probably quite easily find that on an internet search. They would tell you the native and non-native plant species of the UK. It would give you a better explanation as well of native and non-native and of how ...

I think it is to do with when the tree or plant was introduced. For example, there is a sycamore tree – now a lot of people would argue that it was an introduced species, and a lot of people say that it wasn't – that it is a native tree; that it has always been in Scotland. But there is no way of proving that it was introduced. There is a way of proving that it was introduced, but there is no way of proving that it wasn't here beforehand because there is no recorded data to say, "There was a sycamore plantation at such and such a place 600 years ago", but you can't say that the first sycamore ... There is evidence that says that there was a sycamore tree planted at this place on this date and the seed was brought over from somewhere from continental Europe. But also, by that same token, there are people that argue as well that it is likely that the sycamore tree, for example, might have still colonised the UK just through natural causes.

The same thing is said for the beech tree as well. I mean, there are thousands of beech trees in Aberdeen. It is a very good example of a tree that is a non-native to Scotland, but it is native to England and therefore was introduced to Scotland. But there are a lot of people that would argue and say, "Well, because it was native to England, there is no reason to say that it wouldn't have ended up going into Scotland without being introduced." The seed might have [struck] this far north and, obviously, the tree grows perfectly well here – so there is no reason to say that that would not have happened naturally.

Anne Douglas: That is interesting.

TRACK 2

Reiko Goto: Could you please talk again about all the trees in Aberdeen?

Duncan McGregor: Yes, I think I was saying about the way in which they are protected.

Anne Douglas: Do you want to go back over that?

Reiko Goto: Yes, you said there are not many old trees in Aberdeen.

Duncan McGregor: Yes. There are no trees that are older than maybe 200 to 250 years old. I think a lot of the trees that you see around the city are maybe from Victorian time – they were planted at that time. I think when Aberdeen started to get to the kind of size that it is now.

So, there is many other places within Scotland, even, and within the UK as a whole that have trees that are a lot older than that and it [?_____] trees.

Anne Douglas: Does that mean the Caledonian Forest never ...

Duncan McGregor: Well – I think that is another point I was about to come to – is that a lot of the forests and woodlands that were in and around Aberdeen, I believe, were felled maybe about 150 to 200 years ago and possibly even before then. A lot of the big houses, for example, that you see along North Deeside Road and the sort of big kind of stately homes that you have in Aberdeen – a lot of

them, I believe, were owned by timber merchants – or they were built by timber merchants. I think which is maybe the reason why there aren't any trees in Aberdeen that are of a substantial age because they saw it as a natural resource and basically exploited it. *[Did they use it for ship building? K]*

And still, to this day – to a certain extent – if you go out along the River Dee out towards [Grey Market], the amount of plantation and forestry you see along there is just incredible. So, historically, it has very much been an area of the country which has encouraged forestry and production of timber.

Anne Douglas: Yes – which is still going on.

Duncan McGregor: Yes, at least, you can say, "Well that is being managed as a resource" – it is where it comes into conflict with [?_____] for biodiversity; for ecology; and, well, for communities as well.

TRACK 3

Duncan McGregor: I think the big difference that I have noticed in Aberdeen between the two rivers is that the River Don is very much like the – what was it? The Mong?

Reiko Goto: Monongahela River.

Duncan McGregor: Monongahela River – in that there is a lot more industry; or, historically, there has been a lot more industry along the river. Whereas, I think the Dee has not been used so much in an industrial sense. Certainly, not closer to Aberdeen, anyway.

If you walk along parts of the River Don, you can still see evidence of … I think there were three paper mills at one point along the banks of the Don and I think, at one time, the water quality was very poor. It is better now, but as a result of it, the industries along the river are closing down. Yes, I mean, it sounds quite [familiar].

Reiko Goto: [But even the smallest thing] is very important. Not just the children – but children are really excited about [?_____].

[1:09]

Anne Douglas: *[Inaudible]* along here?

Duncan McGregor: I'm not sure.

Anne Douglas: No we thought – maybe it is at Torry – but something. How many [?_____] huge [?_____]. Huge [?_____].

Duncan McGregor: It is possible. Freshwater mussels, I suppose, it might not even be seawater because I think it is tidal up to a certain point. I'm not sure. I really don't know.

Reiko Goto: Is salmon coming back?

Duncan McGregor: On the River Dee? I believe so, yes. I think there is still quite a lot of salmon fishing. Obviously, you can pay a lot of money to go salmon fishing further up the river.

Reiko Goto: But not on the Don River?

Anne Douglas: Not very much.

Duncan McGregor: You can go salmon fishing. I have a friend who goes salmon fishing up near Inverurie. He was fishing there.

Anne Douglas: [?_____] ended up with ...

Duncan McGregor: Yes, I suppose you could go that far as well.

Anne Douglas: Yes, definitely.

Duncan McGregor: But, sorry – the River Don – I believe there are seals on part of the river – at the estuary – you see seals, yes. There is a little island. If you know where the Bridge of Don is, there is a little island if you are going out of Aberdeen – there is a little island on the left-hand side in the Don and you can see seals there. I think the estuary there is quite rich in wildlife.

TRACK 4

Reiko Goto: Make more profit in trees on campus, or more planting of native trees on campus?

Duncan McGregor: Well, I have spoken with a guy called [Ian Kay] who, I think, is a stage-manager. I have spoken to him in the past, and some of the trees on the campus are protected through the conservation area. But then, there are others that aren't.

But he is the one that I would ... You know, he would come to me and ask to carry out work to the trees that are protected. But no, there is no – you know, other than as and when the university need to carry out work, there is no communication otherwise. There is no ... I don't actively go to them and say, "I think you should plant native trees." If they are going to be felling a lot of trees as part of a development proposal, then I might suggest that native trees are planted, and we would see some kind of landscape plant – but other than that – it is only when there is proposed development or there is work proposed to already existing trees that I would get involved. I wouldn't ...

Anne Douglas: Yes, actually, there is a huge amount of [?_____] ...

Duncan McGregor: Yes, I have been involved with the building that they are working on now because, obviously, there are two fairly large trees here – the Redwood and the Austrian Pine – and the architect was very keen to see both of these trees retained because, I think, he felt obviously that from [an amenity] point of view, they had quite a strong position. I try to work with him in saying those trees should be protected for the longer term in terms of the location of the building, the foundations of the buildings etcetera.

Anne Douglas: [[?_____] [Cain] House would be developed.]

Duncan McGregor: Right – ok. I did not know that.

Anne Douglas: [?_____] that section of the building is going to be demolished.

Duncan McGregor: Right – ok. Yes, I knew that ...

Anne Douglas: Yes – and the art school is going to be expanded.

Duncan McGregor: Right – ok. I didn't know that.

Anne Douglas: So there is nothing in your plan for the greening of the city? Are you involved with a section of the river?

Duncan McGregor: I would need to double-check it. One of my colleagues who may be able to give you a better view about [?_____] because he has been here for quite a long time, is a guy called [Ian Nichol] and he is the senior landscape planner, and he has been working in Aberdeen for, I think, forty-three years I think and possibly even longer – and he is very familiar with tree issues and landscape issues within Aberdeen. He has a broader knowledge of Aberdeen – particularly – than I do. I would say, he is probably the person to speak to and I would recommend that you speak to him.

Going back to what you said about, is there a map of the trees in Aberdeen – there is, and there isn't. There is some information that was recently completed – an assessment of the trees in Aberdeen and there are maps that form part of that assessment. I could probably get a copy of that to you, if you want to. There is a lot of information in it. There is also a lot of maps as well. I think it is about 150 pages. It is a 150-page document. I can get that to you. I can give a CD copy of that to you.

Reiko Goto: That would be great, please.

Duncan McGregor: And that talks a lot about engaging communities in the management of woodlands. It talks a lot about the type of tree coverage within the city and it talks about all sorts of different things which, I think, from having seen the presentation that you have just shown me, I think it is something that you would benefit from seeing. It shows you the maps for your areas of tree coverage within the city but that would certainly give you a start, yes.

Reiko Goto: Ok, alright.

Anne Douglas: How do you currently develop the education – the awareness in the community?

Duncan McGregor: *[Laughing thoughtfully]* Personally, I do it by speaking to people. I'm just trying to educate people. That is very slow-going because it is only as and when I do speak to people. There is an organisation called 'The Tree Council' which is a nationally-run organisation. It is a voluntary organisation which runs a tree warden scheme and people throughout the country can belong to a tree-warden scheme and there is a tree-warden scheme in Aberdeen as well. A tree warden is just somebody who volunteers to be involved with trees within a city, so they might carry out some tree-planting; they might carry out some tendering work to recently planted trees; they might be involved with a register of trees within the city – that kind of thing. They might be involved with monitoring of the tree stock in a city as well. There is a whole host of different things in which they could get involved with. Again, I can get you some more information about that, if you are interested. That is a nationally run scheme and as I said, it is The Tree Council.

Up until fairly recently there was an organisation in Aberdeen who had a three-year contract, called Aberdeen Community Trees, and the person that was the lead officer for that (if you like) was a guy

called [Geoff Banks] and he was essentially with the Aberdeen Community Trees. He was the one that put these together. He was also the person that was co-ordinating the tree-warden scheme in Aberdeen. That has now been passed over to the council to run because Aberdeen Community Trees no longer exist. The funding for their organisation was finished, unfortunately.

The other thing as well – I have been talking about community involvement and all things trees ... There is a scheme called WIAT which is 'Woodlands In And Around Towns' which is being co-ordinated ... Well, it is a grant scheme which is being run by The Forestry Commission and it gives grants to people to manage their woodlands for the benefit of communities. So, as a council, we have been involved in getting grant-aid to help us with managing woodlands that are close to communities so that they, for example, might ... The kind of things that we would get money for would be to upgrade paths running through woodlands; fencing; gates; and actual maintenance of the trees – that kind of thing; interpretation boards within the woodlands to help with education etcetera. That is quite [an interesting] thing.

And again, The Woodlands Assessment of Aberdeen has information about WIAT in there as well.

Anne Douglas: Is that the Forestry Commission?

Duncan McGregor: It is the Forestry Commission. It is a grant scheme that is run by them. Anybody who privately or publicly owns woodlands can apply for a WIAT grant but it quite clearly has to have a benefit to the community. It has to have a link to the local community. I think it tends to be more public bodies or voluntary bodies that are taking up the grants. There is not so much private individuals.

TRACK 5

Duncan McGregor: [It is just a matter of trying to educate people and, as a council, say, "Right, ok – we want to plant more trees."] We, as a council, we can say that and on our land we can do that. But it is trying to encourage private individuals who own a large proportion of the land – it is trying to encourage them to plant trees and that is for the wider environment. Now, the problem obviously exists in Aberdeen and, I guess, in many other cities, is that land is a valuable asset – particularly in urban areas such as Aberdeen and other cities etcetera.

You are talking about protecting trees – the protection of trees usually only happens where there is a threat to the trees. It is very difficult to pre-empt where the threat is going to be. It would be nice to be able to say that in ten years' time we are going to have this many trees protected, but we don't really know which trees require protection because, obviously, there are woodlands that are not being managed and they never will be and it will be a hundred years before anybody even sort of looks to do anything to them. We don't need to worry about those because there is no immediate threat to them. [It is the ones that have immediate threats to them], particularly in a city with the threat of development.

Anne Douglas: You talked about [?_____] connected. It sounds like you are [?_____] Forest in Newcastle and Gateshead.

Duncan McGregor: I don't know. I am not familiar with those.

Anne Douglas: It sounds like ...

Duncan McGregor: The Green Space Network [is what I am getting at.] It is not just woodlands and forests. It is as much about the open space and it is about joining up larger areas with corridors of green space to join up the larger areas and that is something that, as a council, we are trying to do. But there is a lack of resources and interest to a certain extent in influencing that.

Anne Douglas: [And yet – it is such a natural thing. You know, when you are on other side of the river and looking back at Duthie Park? I was trying to tell you that – [there is a walk] that is actually just below Tallus Industrial with huge areas of green on either side of the river which people use. You can walk for a long way, and then back onto this park – and you do get a sense of a huge green space which is the other face of the city. The great ... [They are in a way] the great opportunity to [? _____]. Because people use them a lot.

Duncan McGregor: That is the thing about a lot of the expansion of the city. It sounds like, as it gets bigger, that has something [to do with it] – the real kind of threat is, because you've got this thing about the boundaries of the city where they are constantly looking to build further into green space and green land. So , it is all very well in having large areas of green space within the city. That is important. But it is also – as the city is expanding, creating or maintaining areas of green space so that you have, for example, areas such Duthie Park and the other side of the river as well. You know, you have then further [development] of the city. Because the way it, they just keep building and everything will just be concrete.

Anne Douglas: It is very evident when you are on the Afford Road – it is at Kingswells - [? _____]. If you take the road past country from Peterculter ...

Duncan McGregor: Westhill?

Anne Douglas: Westhill.

Duncan McGregor: Yes, yes. There are loads like that. That is the boundary of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. It is actually in Aberdeenshire. Yes – a lot of that is Aberdeenshire and they are kind of ... You know ... To a certain extent – again, there is two sides to the coin for that with the issue that you are saying, "There is a lot of houses being built and a lot of green spaces being spoilt up" but you could also make the argument that it is better to concentrate in that one area rather than lots of little bits elsewhere. But I don't know enough about that. I don't know if that is true or not.

Anne Douglas: So it is in the Shire?

Duncan McGregor: Yes, it is certainly going in. Westhill.

Anne Douglas: Oh really. I didn't realise. So you guys couldn't get involved – and when ...

Duncan McGregor: Well, the route – to a certain extent. Obviously, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire are working on a structured plan and it is a joint thing between the two councils.

TRACK 6

Anne Douglas: There seems to be two gaps: one is the public imagination in relationship to the issue.

Duncan McGregor: Yes ... I find it quite frustrating. I think it is more to do with the kind of job that I do because I deal with a lot of development and so, therefore, I maybe deal with more people who are interested in having trees removed. So it is maybe a little bit more negative from that point of view.

I think from my experience – or very little experience from working in other parts of the country – there does seem to be a general lack of interest in Aberdeen with all things tree-related. There is a hard core of people who are interested but, you know, there seems to be a kind of ... I can't think what the word is.

Anne Douglas: Complacency?

Duncan McGregor: Complacency for certain. I suppose it is not ignorance – it is just apathy. Yes, apathy is the word I was looking for. There just seems to be a general kind of apathy.

Reiko Goto: [?_____] when you go out of the area, it is really open and green and then we are talking about a different kind of greenness and people usually don't go to such a deep level on this kind of nature. That is one issue.

Anne Douglas: That is very important.

Reiko Goto: How to do that and try to *[get them to]* look at nature differently – how to do it.

Anne Douglas: Yes, [as another] / [rather than a] resource. To look at it as a relationship. Isn't that true, that it focuses – the philosophical focus of Reiko's work is how can you develop [a relationship with the country].

Duncan McGregor: Right.

Anne Douglas: I walk up and down the railway lines here and having lived for twelve years right out, past Afford, I just find it really extraordinary, the way people use that railway line. I don't know. [?_____] like in a book. How the relationship with walking [?_____] – jogging; taking the dog for a walk; taking the kids to ride a bike – it is absolutely not to do with observing; appreciation; being in ...

Duncan McGregor: But maybe it is, to a certain extent, because people want to get out.

Anne Douglas: Yes, of course. [?_____]

Duncan McGregor: Yes, that is very much how I feel sometimes as well. I don't think people would use it if it wasn't the way it is. If it wasn't a green space ...

Anne Douglas: [?_____] Right! Ok.

Duncan McGregor: If it wasn't a green corridor ...

Anne Douglas: Sure! Absolutely!

Duncan McGregor: If it was just a pavement and there wasn't as many trees along – I don't think people would use it as much. Yes.

Anne Douglas: No, it is clearly important. I diminished the importance – hugely. For me it is a lifeline! Otherwise I would be driving, and I don't drive – I walk, even in the middle of winter. It is [going through] the weather – it is fantastic.

But then, the idea – how do you take the relationship deeper? That is a very interesting issue.

TRACK 7

Duncan McGregor: There is a little bit – talking about it, now that [Jacqueline] isn't with us – there is a little bit of a problem in Aberdeen when [Jacqueline] is not with us.

American woman: It is pretty [?_____], right?

Duncan McGregor: Yes, certainly along parts of the River Don and I think it is not so bad along the Dee, but …

[End of Track 7 – only 20 seconds.]