



'Toxic closed-shop': calls for John Muir Trust leadership to go

13TH SEPTEMBER REWILDING CHARITY ENVIRONMENT NATURE



David Balharry (Image: PR Handout)



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Former staff, trustees and a previous chair of Scotland's wild places charity, the John Muir Trust, have called for the resignation of its chair and chief executive officer, describing "an unforgiveable failure of leadership" and "toxic culture".

"There is," said former chair of the trust, John Hutchison, "something far wrong here. The longer this goes on the more danger to the John Muir Trust."

Hutchison called for the activities of the Trust to be urgently investigated by **Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator** (OSCR) which has, since David Balharry took the post of CEO, received fourteen concern submissions, all of these since 2023, some by several individuals acting together.

One trustee, Alison Russell, who resigned earlier this year, described the charity as "a dreadful, toxic, closed shop" and called for the chief executive David Balharry and the chair, Jane Smallman, to "both leave".

These calls were also echoed by several former staff. One former director of operations, for instance, told the Herald: "The bottom line is that the CEO and Chair need to go, otherwise the charity is going to go under. There needs to be enough public pressure for them to go."

A former chief financial officer said: "Look at the facts. There has been a financial crisis, there is a high staff turnover and multiple people have talked about toxic culture and the toxic culture is not fixed. That's the bottom line.

"In my professional opinion, a new chair and new CEO could turn the Trust around. It wouldn't take long to fix given the strength of the brand and the loyalty of its members.

"The thing that surprises me the most is that this is one of the most well-known, and well-respected charities in Scotland. Why are the CEO and chair not out? Why is there not more of an uproar?"

Criticisms range from "failures of governance" and secrecy by the chair, Jane Smallman, who is also a non-executive director at Ports of Jersey, to allegations of "bullying and intimidation" by the CEO, David Balharry.

They come after several turbulent years during which Balharry, in 2023, was suspended following allegations of bullying and intimidation, then, in October of that year, following an investigation and declared 'fully exonerated' by the chair.

But the phrase “fully exonerated” is disputed as inaccurate by former staff, who point out that this is not what the investigator’s report stated.

The contents and conclusions of the investigator’s report were later leaked and some of it published in a dossier by the former public affairs manager and the editor of the John Muir Trust Journal, Alan McCombes.



John Muir Trust looks after Ben Nevis

McCombes “dossier” detailed the charity’s crisis. “Of the 65 staff members who were on the books at the end of June 2023,” it observed, “only 23 remain (though some have since been replaced).”

He described this as “brain drain on an epic scale”. The year before the redundancies, he noted, the trust had spent £2.1million on an 18-hectare strip of land, ten holiday lodges, and a residential house at Kylesku, viewed by many as well outwith its wild land remit.

The John Muir Trust was founded in 1983, inspired by the Scots-born American conservationist John Muir, to protect and enhance wild places in the UK. It cares for iconic landscapes like Ben Nevis and Knoydart. One of its previous chairs was David Balharry’s father, the pioneering conservationist, Dick Balharry.



The John Muir Trust recently bought lodges at Kylesku(*Image: Sean MacKay*)

Around 1,000 members (10%) left during 2024 alone and some valuable legacies have been withdrawn, including one, of £250,000, which a life member of the Trust has now removed from her will.

That life member described how she wrote to the chair last September, saying, “I no longer have confidence in the financial management of the trust. Reading the last two year’s accounts and hearing the justifications made at the AGM last weekend confirmed for me that JMT is not the organisation it used to be.”

In the dossier, the leadership and behaviour of David Balharry was frequently identified as the key problem. "It has been a startling revelation," wrote Alan McCombes, "to discover the extent of fear and insecurity generated by the conduct and performance of the CEO".

That is backed by recent statements to The Herald from a former staff member. A former director (name and gender withheld) in post in 2023, told The Herald that the management then felt “oppressive and chaotic”. They said they had felt “bullied and intimidated” by the CEO and that others expressed similar views.

"On advice from the whistleblowing charity, Protect, they said: "We reached out to the chair to try and meet to raise concerns, however this was refused and we were told to follow the process. The only way to make the board aware of the concerns was to raise this with trustees beyond the chair.”

Following this, the CEO was suspended and investigated. But that investigation, the former director said, was “a complete farce in that the outcomes communicated to the press and staff did not reflect the investigation findings”.

On its completion, the chair declared the CEO “fully exonerated”. But that was not, said the former director, an accurate portrayal of what the investigator’s report had stated.

"The report," they said, "did find that the CEO had exhibited behaviour akin to bullying and intimidation and that the matters should be considered under the appropriate policies and procedures of the trust."

David Balharry said he had been completely vindicated and said: “Being suspended for false allegations hurts as does any injustice in life.”

Mr Hutchison said: “Claiming that the CEO was completely exonerated following the inquiry was false. OSCR, the charity regulator, should take an interest in getting to the bottom of this sort of thing."



John Hutchison, former chair of the John Muir Trust(*Image: Mark Ulano*)

A June 2024 report, published on the John Muir Trust website, and prepared by employment lawyer Karen McGill, stated that “none of the written grievances contained allegations, that, in my view, would necessarily have warranted the suspension of the CEO”.

However, the Trust's difficulties and controversies did not end in June 2024. Also striking has been the turnover in financial officers. The John Muir Trust has had three CFOs and now an interim Finance Director in the last two years. One, resigned in

January this year, after, she said, getting “burnt out” by the experience of working there and feeling “pushed out by a lack of support and toxic behaviour”.

The resignation by this CFO was also, in part, what triggered trustee and former CFO, Alison Russell, to resign earlier this year.

“Having experienced the culture there,” she said, “which is one of secrecy - in which confidentiality trumps everything, and which relies on lawyers to back up poor decisions - I think with the CEO and Chair staying in post, nothing will get any better. My experience is that people who challenge 'received wisdom' or the status quo are either bullied into submission or leave in frustration.”

Russell had been suspended by the board in April of 2025. This followed her expressing concern during the March Board meeting over why the new CFO had resigned after a few months. The CFO was also on two months' paid garden leave during the critical year-end audit. Russell contacted the CFO to check the reasons trustees had been given for her resignation.

A few days after the chair became aware of this, the trust withdrew a settlement offer to the CFO. “The CFO,” Russell said, “then contacted the Board and stated that her ‘position had become untenable’.”

Immediately prior to her suspension, Russell told the board that she had breached confidentiality and explained why she had done so. However, she said, she does not believe she breached the Trust’s Articles, nor any relevant legal duty.

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Members of the Trust have also expressed their concern, and one told me: “The John Muir Trust doesn’t feel like a very open or democratic organisation. The turnover in staff has been pretty shocking.”

She described how she had been part of a group that wrote to the trustees to ask their views on some matters. She felt the response back “was always corporate, and came back through the chair so it wasn’t even clear whether the things we had said to individual trustees had been read by individual trustees”. There was the feeling that they were being given “the party line”.

The calls for resignation come in the run up to the John Muir Trust’s AGM, set to take place on September 15 and amidst criticisms that last year’s meeting was overly controlled.

The meeting was online, the hand raising function was disabled, as was chat, and, though questions could be submitted they would be answered in writing after the AGM.

“We have no idea,” said Hutchison, “how many questions were lodged, whether they were all answered. Effectively, there was no opportunity for members to scrutinise the activities of the chair and board, which is a fundamental purpose of an AGM.”

“While I am not claiming that there was anything special about my time as chair, we worked hard at involving members, encouraging attendance at AGM and members gatherings, arranging open forums, all with the purpose of allowing members to engage with their charity. I’m left with the impression that the current leadership are scared of engagement and scrutiny.”

He also described a recent JMT election as “a mess”, detailing his concerns in a recent letter to The Herald.

“In the 2025 election, we were presented by five candidates proposed by existing trustees and partners and family of the CEO. Some of the candidates only became members last year and some of those proposing them were recently co-opted by the chair. Democracy is much lacking.”

Hutchison pointed out that the board should be accountable to the members. “But the way things are being run now though, is akin to a private trust, where trustees are all-powerful; in the John Muir Trust they shouldn’t be.”

He recalled that in April 2024, on behalf of two founder members and another past chair, he sought a meeting with the Chair, Jane Smallman, for an open discussion.

“That,” he said, “was effectively refused, she instead preferring to enter into detailed elaboration of each point of concern and its provenance.”

He added: “We need the urgent attention of OSCR to run a proper investigation. Then, if OSCR confirms our worst fears, ideally to remove those trustees involved in the malpractice in recent years, instruct a fresh election, appoint an interim chair.”

For comparison, during the period since 2020, in which fourteen concern submissions have been made to OSCR over The John Muir Trust, only five were submitted for the **National Trust for Scotland**, two for Scottish Wildlife Trust and zero for WWF Scotland.

“Leadership,” said Hutchison, “should inspire and encourage but the control being exercised at board and staff level has resulted in trustees and personnel voting with their feet, with the result that turnover has been unprecedented, severely damaging the reputation of the JMT.”

“The trust’s eminent reputation has been gained by the ability and credibility of experienced staff, however this has all but gone.”

A spokesperson for the John Muir Trust said: “The John Muir Trust is the only UK charity dedicated solely to the protection of wild places for everyone, now and for the future.

“Our focus is on protecting and enhancing the land we care for, and our team is proud to steward some of the UK’s most iconic wild landscapes, demonstrating how restoration and protection can work in practice.

“The John Muir Trust values wild places both for ecology and for human experience, protecting habitats as well as the sense of scale, solitude, and awe that only wild places can provide. We manage our land by ensuring that natural processes and landscapes are given primacy, so they can thrive and regenerate.

“We also advocate for the protection of wild places from the constant attrition of industrial development. As a small charity that challenges the threats to wild places, we expect scrutiny and welcome discussion. We are open and accountable to our members and regulators – most importantly about the ways in which we are determined to protect wild places.

“Over the coming days we will be hosting our Members’ Gathering event and also our AGM, and we look forward to updating our members and supporters on the progress we are making.

“This progress sees us taking forward a structured process to professionalise the charity and drive demonstratable change. We want to ensure the Trust can continue to deliver for another 40 years, building on the foundations set by our first 42 years.”

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