

Three-Year Conservation Project Begins at Nature Spot

By GARRY MCCARTNEY

CONSERVATION work has begun at a local nature spot of international importance.

Moray Estates have secured funding for the removal of invasive plant species at Findhorn Gorge over the next three years.

"The woodlands at Findhorn Gorge are very special," said woodlands manager Ben Clinch.

"The habitats and species need careful and sensitive management to protect them and ensure that we can enjoy them in many years to come." The area has been designated a European Special Area of Conservation

for its mixed native woodland and is a UK Site of Special Scientific Interest for three different woodland types, its bryophyte and lichen populations and its oligotrophic (low nutrient) river.

Monitoring carried out by Scottish Natural Heritage has shown that the increasing amount of non-native tree species (mostly beech) is damaging the site. Beech and other non-native trees are out-competing native tree species such as oak and ash, changing the conditions for other woodland species, such as flowers and fungi. Beech in particular casts a dense shade, having a detrimental effect on lichens especially, as many species require higher levels of light to flourish.

"We will be trialling non-native

control methods to reverse the decline in conditions," said Ben, "and benefit the native woodland and all its associated species."

"We will target areas where important lichen populations are found using a mix of methods such as felling and removing trees, and using herbicide plugs to kill trees standing."

He added: "The work will also provide valuable deadwood habitat for many invertebrate and fungi species."

Three Moray Estates staff and three climbing contractors are working on the project.

Findhorn Gorge is enjoyed by many people, from fishermen to walkers, paddlers and horse riders. This year the work will be focused in three areas downstream of Dounecluff Car Park and upstream of the Meads. From now until December 12 some paths may be closed during weekdays in this period.

"We aim to minimise disruption of access to and enjoyment of the gorge," added Ben.



Local arboricultural contractor, Jeremy Thornhill, from Broom of Moy, working in Findhorn Gorge to save local species. Jeremy and his team will be working on the project for a two-four week period each year.