

Regularising the Gaelic names for native species of ferns and their allies

Coitcheannachadh ainmean Gàidhlig airson gnèithean dùthchasach de rainich agus lusan caidreabhach

The project to regularise the Gaelic terminology for native species of ferns and related plants (pteridophytes) arose from a desire to see the Gaelic language used more in relation to teaching and discussion of nature and the natural heritage. It followed on from comprehensive work of a similar nature on flowering plants (other than trees) done by Ian MacDonald and Joan W Clark and published in book form as ‘Ainmean Gàidhlig Lusan / Gaelic Names of Plants’ (North Ballachulish, 1999). While the nomenclature will be of interest and value to non Gaelic-speakers, the primary focus of the project was to make the names more accessible and user-friendly to the Gaelic-speaking community itself.

Several authorities have included Gaelic names of ferns, notably Cameron (‘Gaelic Names of Plants’, 1883 and 1900), Dwelly (‘Faclair Gàidhlig gu Beurla’, 1901), Clyne (‘Gaelic Names for Flowers and Plants’, 1989), MacDonald/Campbell (‘Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay’) and Garvie (‘Gaelic Names of Plants, Fungi and Animals’, 1999). However, none of the lists were comprehensive in terms of presenting names for the range of known species in Scotland. The following were seen as defects in comparison with the situation in the English language:

- there was a lack of generic terms for taxa within the pteridophytes (eg there was no general Gaelic term for ‘clubmosses’ or ‘filmy ferns’).
- some species had no recorded Gaelic name.
- some species had multiple names, with none recognised as a ‘standard’.

It is important to note with regard to the last that the standardised list does not seek to destroy dialectal or regional usage of particular names where such exist. Indeed, such knowledge should be encouraged. However, there is a clear need to recommend a standard name where no local or dialectal knowledge exists and for use in formal and educational platforms throughout Scotland.

The project set out to:

- create generic terms for taxonomic groups within the pteridophytes.
- recommend a standard name for each species native to Scotland.
- create new names for species without a recorded Gaelic name.

The modus operandi was as follows:

- A list of 85 native species was collated, including the standard or ‘common’ English name and the scientific name for each. They were grouped accorded to accepted scientific taxa.

- Irish and Welsh names for each species were collected where available.
- The literature was consulted for recorded Gaelic names for each species.
- A nomenclature committee of people with expertise in Gaelic and botany agreed on a recommended standard name for each species and on recommended 'generic' terms (eg for the clubmosses, horsetails, spleenworts).
- The list was opened for public consultation and posted on Scottish Natural Heritage's website.
- Following the consultation, the nomenclature committee revised the list. Responding to requests in the consultation process, a code letter was added to recommended names to indicate a neologism where no recorded name existed for the species prior to this project.
- The final list of recommended names was posted on SNH's website.
- A secondary comprehensive list of names recorded in the literature for each species was collated and also posted on SNH's website. The purpose of this list is as a resource for scholars and for people with an interest in dialectal and local usages.
- A recommended list of ancillary terms relating to the biology of ferns and their allies was agreed by the nomenclature committee and was also posted on the SNH website

Among the issues encountered were the following:

- retention of meaningful and interesting names recorded in the literature, while recommending a degree of commonality of nomenclature based on scientific taxa. A balance needed to be struck between the two.
- when a new name was required, the committee examined the plant's characteristics, its taxonomic similarity to species which were already named in Gaelic and its nomenclature in other languages (scientific, English, Irish and Welsh). Where translation from another language was employed, the English nomenclature was generally seen as the most applicable influence on the Gaelic name because of the familiarity and accessibility of the language, and the difficulty encountered in occasional changes to the scientific name (which might render a translation to a vernacular name obsolete). Gaelic-speakers are fluent users of English and will often encounter the English names for plants, particularly in the written form, before hearing or seeing the Gaelic name.

It is important to note that the expert committee whose work resulted in the list of standard names for Scottish ferns and allies has no legal standing or authority. Therefore, its conclusions and recommendations are not set in stone and are not beyond challenge. The work, however, was done in good faith in order to provide a resource for the Gaelic language community in Scotland and it is hoped that it will encourage greater usage of Gaelic with respect to nature and the environment.

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