



Wild Land News

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group

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ISSUE 102
Spring 2023

A photograph of a mountain valley with a waterfall. The valley is filled with lush green grass and vegetation, and the waterfall is a prominent feature in the center. The mountains are rugged and rocky, with some greenery on the slopes.

Trees, trees & more trees
Renewables & our wild landscapes
Pylons in my backyard
Pumped storage schemes
Rockets galore!
The wildness of the Cuillin
Varieties of wildness

Spring 2023

WILD LAND NEWS

Issue 102

Magazine of the
Scottish Wild Land Group

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Front cover: Above Loch
Achtriochtan, Glen Coe

Left: Coire Gaibhail, or 'The
Lost Valley', Glen Coe.

Photos: James Fenton

Editorial

There is a lot in this issue of *Wild Land News*! Chris Townsend starts with a *critique* of many schemes to expand woodland in wild land across the Highlands, especially those which involve tree planting. He is particularly critical of those who want ‘instant forests’, whether for climate change mitigation or biodiversity reasons.

It is hoped that his article begins a long-needed debate about how much woodland and forest cover we would like to see in our wild land. After all, the eminent Scottish geologist James Geikie, way back in 1867, wrote a paper which concluded that Scotland’s native forests had disappeared naturally¹ and, more recently, the Historiographer Royal, Chris Smout, states that “Let us begin with the Great Wood of Caledon. It is, in every sense of the word, a myth.”²

Climate change, or the ‘climate emergency’ as it is currently called, is of course one of the major issues facing humanity. However harvesting the natural energy flows of wind, water, sun and biomass requires a lot of land: they all have a low energy density compared to fossil fuels. This then leads to a clash of cultural values: does the need to decarbonise override the need to keep at least some parts



of the planet wild? Should it override the need to conserve the increasingly rare places across the planet where nature is still in charge and the visible hand of humankind is absent? The Scottish Wild Land Group certainly believes that there is a strong need to conserve wildness and Scotland’s Wild Land Areas should be sacrosanct.

Hence there is a string of articles in this newsletter illustrating some of the renewable energy developments being proposed and their impact on both wild land and people. Bill Stephens’ article presents an in-depth analysis of how the planning system has dealt with the issue of wild land and development; he argues that the new National Planning Framework 4 has been unduly influenced by the renewable energy lobby.

Thereafter, Mark Aitken describes how he enjoyed traversing one of the wildest areas of Scotland, the Black Cuillin of Skye. This issue then finishes with a more philosophical article by Dennis Smith on the importance of conserving wildness.

¹ Geikie J (1867) On the buried forests and peat mosses of Scotland, and the changes of climate which they indicate. *Transactions of the Royal Society, Edinburgh* XXIV (Part II): 363-384.

² Smout TC (2000) *Nature Contested*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. 210pp.

SWLG believes there is a strong need to conserve wildness

Trees, Trees & More Trees

This article is based on the presentation Chris gave to the SWLG’s 2022 AGM in Perth on 2nd December.

Last October I wandered down Glen Feshie and up the narrow side glen called Slochd Mor and onto Càrn Dearg Mòr. I hadn’t been up this 857-metre Corbett for several years. I remembered it as a big rather shapeless moorland hill with good views into Glen Feshie. The hill is changing though. The south side has been planted with Scots pine as part of Wild Land Ltd.’s restoration of the Caledonian Forest. Climbing up through the tiny trees, most barely a foot high, I wondered about the increasing drive to spread trees throughout the hills and the different forms it takes. Here it looked like an

incipient plantation, rows of identikit saplings covering the hillside.

There’s an old pinewood next to these plantings, probably a plantation itself. With the reduction in grazing pressure that has already taken place in the area, resulting in the massive forest regeneration in Glen Feshie, I imagine that this wood would gradually spread and colonise nearby areas suitable for pines. But that would take many years. For various reasons people are impatient and want forests now.

The Wild Land plantings on Càrn Dearg Mòr aren’t fenced so at least the new forest will be able to spread naturally and there won’t be the harsh unnatural straight lines and the abrupt difference between moorland and forest seen in too many places. That’s

People are impatient and want forests now



A Scots pine plantation below Càrn Dearg Mòr on the Glen Feshie Estate. Photo. James Fenton, taken in 2021



Glen Feshie. Photo. Chris Townsend

not the case with Brew Dog's "Lost Forest" on the Kinrara Estate between Strathspey and the River Dulnain. Here the company has employed Scottish Woodlands to create a forest by fencing and planting. This isn't restoring a forest, this is starting a new one. In fact it will probably overwhelm the forest regeneration that is already taking place slowly. Obviously not fast enough for Brew Dog. Instant forest! Now!

The mass planting is causing damage too, with new vehicle tracks, some gouged quite deeply into the peat, spreading over the hillsides. They won't heal quickly. The fencing itself is ugly and obtrusive, straight lines cutting across open moorland, restricting ease of access and taking

away any feeling of wildness. The fences can of course be removed. If they ever are there will just be the abrupt disjuncture between forest and moorland. Fencing is also detrimental to wildlife. That capercaillie can be killed by flying into fences is well-known. The Lost Forest fencing looks designed to keep out mountain hares as well as deer. This is an area where the hares are relatively common. I always see them here.



Old pines, new pines in Glen Feshie. Photo. Chris Townsend



Heavy machinery and fence posts on Brew Dog's 'Lost Forest', Kinrara Estate. Photo. Chris Townsend

What becomes of them as the planting and the fences take over?

It's not just commercial companies planting and fencing. Conservation organisations have been doing this too, sometimes for much longer, since 1993 in the case of Trees for Life in Glen Affric. The RSPB is planting small numbers of trees in its Abernethy Reserve to provide a seed source for forest expansion, the National Trust for Scotland is planting trees high up in treeless glens on its Mar Lodge Estate,

and the John Muir Trust plants trees on some of its estates such as Schiehallion. In all these places deer numbers are controlled to allow trees to grow.

There are many other forest restoration schemes throughout Scotland with perhaps the most dramatic being Carrifran in the Southern Uplands where a valley has been turned from sheep pasture into a young forest by the Borders Forest Trust.



One of Brew Dog's 'Lost Forest' fences cutting across the hillside, Kinrara Estate. Photo. Chris Townsend



Tree regeneration and old forest, Ryvoan.
Photo. Chris Townsend

What does all this mean for wild land? I don't think there's a simple answer. I think some of these schemes are positive and will enhance wild land while others are disastrous and will worsen the quality of wild land. Whilst overall I am in favour of forest restoration in suitable areas I think it needs to be done carefully and with a view to the long-term, the very long-term.

Cairngorms Connect, a partnership of neighbouring land managers, including the RSPB and Wild Land, covering over 600 square-kilometres of the northern Cairngorms National Park has a 200-



year vision. This is an area with much remaining native forest already and this has been spreading for many years, as can be seen in the young trees creeping up the slopes of Meall a'Bhuachaille above the Ryvoan Pass. In little-visited parts of the area (due mainly to lack of paths and tough terrain for walking) I've come across isolated old pines with a scattering of little offspring all around.

Forest restoration should not mean forests everywhere and I am alarmed at the simplistic thinking coming from some quarters that can be summed up as 'trees good, no trees bad'. There are huge areas, especially expanses of deep peat (plenty of that in the Highlands!), that need conserving and restoring as moorland and not turned into forests. A repeat of the Flow Country disaster should be avoided. Just because it's native trees being

Forest restoration should not mean forests everywhere

Tree regeneration advancing up Meall a'Bhuachaille, Glenmore. Photo. Chris Townsend

planted to restore 'lost forests' rather than Sitka spruce for commercial forestry doesn't mean it's less destructive.

Where forest restoration does take place there's a hierarchy of methods running from, in my opinion, good to bad. The best is natural regeneration without fencing. Reduce overgrazing and wait. Trees will spring up where they can grow. Next comes a scattering of unfenced planted trees to provide a seed source for species missing locally in areas without excessive grazing pressures. This is what the RSPB and NTS are doing. Natural regeneration with fencing isn't desirable but may be the only possibility in some areas.

Fenced planting in areas where there is no local seed source if done carefully and not as a blanket of trees is better than nothing (an example of this is the Bad na Sgalag Native Pinewood at Gairloch which looks

fairly natural though the fence lines are still obtrusive). Mass planting leading to a solid covering of even-aged trees is not a good option and is even worse in areas where there is already natural regeneration, especially if fenced as well. Any forest should fit with the landscape and have enough variety for increased biodiversity.

There's also the question of how already existing forests are managed. My view is they should be left to manage themselves once grazing is under control. A few years ago I was disturbed when walking round Loch an Eilein in the Rothiemurchus Forest in the Cairngorms to see that a number of perfectly healthy Scots pines had been felled and that new tracks had been created to bring in heavy machinery and haul the timber out. Why? There were signs to enlighten me. 'We love trees', one said, followed by 'thinning and regeneration felling



The newly planted Bad na Sgalag Native Pinewood, Gairloch, with Slioch. Photo. Chris Townsend



Forest thinning by Loch an Eilein, Rothiemurchus Forest. Photo: Chris Townsend

allows trees and ground vegetation to grow back'. Really? How about not destroying them in the first place so they don't have to grow back? 'Some trees and branches are left in the forest to provide deadwood for insects and fungi'. Note the 'some'. The rest I presume would be sold. The forest is full of deadwood anyway. The signs claimed the felling will 'improve' the forest. Like hell it will. 'If the area is not disturbed or trampled, heather and blaeberrys will grow back, and wildlife will move into this area' – wildlife that has been driven out by the felling and heather and blaeberrys that have been trashed by it. And how long will the deep trenches of tracks take to

heal? To add to the insults there was also a request to stay on maintained paths to help the wildlife. I guess heavy machinery destroying their habitat doesn't harm them.

The desire to manage nature is one of the problems with some conservation bodies. *If we want wild land then the land needs leaving alone.* The results may not be what we envisage but that's part of the nature of wildness, it's self-willed. What is the aim of forest restoration? Just lots of trees to combat climate change but do nothing for the nature crisis? A means of carbon offsetting for companies? Or allowing nature to return and flourish, to enhance biodiversity and increase wildness? I am concerned that the first two of these are becoming the dominant reasons for new forests.

And what sort of forests are being created? Was there a time when the forest was in some way finished, perfect? The Great Wood of Caledon

My main concern is the spread of 'instant forests'

Fenced regeneration on the Letterewe Estate on the N side of Loch Maree. Photo: C. Townsend



sweeping across the land. Of course not. Forests are dynamic, ever-changing. Any new forest, even one regenerating from existing woodland, will not be the same as any previous one but will fit the land as it is now. Careful use of seeds from local trees may ensure that a new forest contains mostly similar trees to those previously there but that's all. It won't be the same forest restored. It certainly won't be the same as the forest was thousands of years ago.

There will be new species in future forests too. Sitka spruce, by far the commonest tree in Scotland, and European larch are not going away. I've seen many self-seeded far from any plantations. Sitka spruce will continue to be the mainstay of commercial forestry too so there will be a constant supply of seeds to take root elsewhere. With these plantations what matters is where the trees are planted and how they are managed. Breaking up straight line edges and introducing other species in

places can soften spruce plantations and make them more a little more wildlife friendly. This would still be far from a natural forest but would be an improvement on the solid Sitka blocks found all over Scotland.

Climate change will be important too and is probably having an effect already. Climate changes may have hastened the demise of previous forests, this rapid climate change may hasten the spread of new ones as trees spread higher and higher up hillsides.

My major concern at present though is the spread of Brew Dog-style 'instant forests' – large areas given over to what are effectively plantations of native trees. This is not how wild land should be managed.

Regeneration with some planting, Ryvoan Pass, RSPB Abernethy. Photo: Chris Townsend



Solitary old pine with a scattering of young pines on the eastern side of Carn Eilrig, Rothiemurchus Forest. Photo: Chris Townsend



Good news for a change!

Undergrounding power lines

SSEN Transmission are upgrading the National Grid line taking power from Fort Augustus to the Outer Hebrides via Skye.

This includes 110km of new double circuit 132kV overhead line supported by steel lattice towers between Fort Augustus and Broadford, 27km of new single circuit 132kV overhead line supported by trident wood poles (H poles) between Broadford and Ardmore substation, and approximately 24km of double circuit 132kV underground cable.

It is the 15km section section within or adjacent to The Cuillin Hills National Scenic Area (from the north of Sligachan to Luib) which is being undergrounded; and, further east, 9km from Loch Lundie to Fort Augustus.

Full details of the plans can be viewed here: <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/project-map/skye-reinforcement/>

The BBC News website lists other line undergrounding carried out by SSEN Transmission:

– The first of 32 electricity towers around Killin in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park have been removed. The £22m project will see about five miles (8km) of overhead line removed from the National Park.

– Last year, 12 towers were removed from near Inveruglas, on the shores of Loch Lomond, with 7km of line put underground. A similar project was completed at Glen Falloch near Criarlarich in spring 2022.

– In 2020, 12km of overhead line and 46 towers near Boat of Garten and Nethy Bridge in the Cairngorms National Park were replaced and the cables buried underground.

It is good to see landscape issues being taken seriously by SSEN, even if only within National Scenic Areas and National Parks.

It is good to see landscape issues being taken seriously

The Cuillin Hills NSA. Photo. James Fenton



Pumped storage schemes

Earba pumped storage scheme

Gilkes Energy plan to build a new pumped storage scheme within the Rannoch-Alder-Mamores-Alder Wild Land Area (WLA 14), southeast of Loch Laggan. It is termed the 'Earba Storage Scheme'.

The proposal consists of combining the two lochs of Lochan na-Earba into one by building a dam at each end. This loch is below the popular climbing crags of Binnein Shias and Binnein Shuos, and will become the lower end of the pumped scheme. The upper loch is Loch a'Bhealaich Leamhain, situated at 610 metres between the Munros of Geal Charn and Beinn a'Chlachair, with a new dam at the east end.

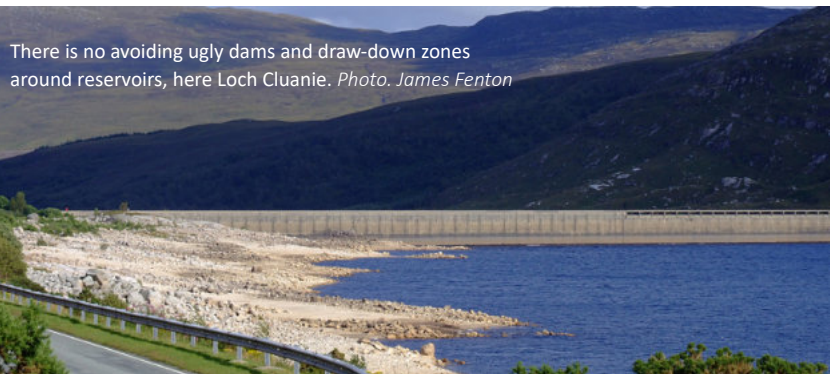
The dams will significantly increase the water levels of both lochs. The lower loch will empty as the higher loch fills during pumping, and vice-versa when water flows back to create electricity.

The continually changing water levels will result in significant draw-down zones around each loch, which will be highly visible when levels are low – as can be seen around the nearby Loch Laggan. No mitigation is possible to prevent this.

The developers say this will be the largest such project in the UK. They helpfully provide full details of the project, including maps, on the dedicated project website: <https://earbastorage.co.uk/>

The scheme is rated at 900 megawatts, with a storage capacity of 33,000 megawatt hours. This means that when the upper reservoir is full, it could provide 900 megawatts for 36 hours or one and a half days. The aim of such schemes is to provide back-up storage of energy from windfarms: storing excess energy in windy periods, and release it when winds are light or absent. They are particularly useful for

Draw-down zones cannot be mitigated



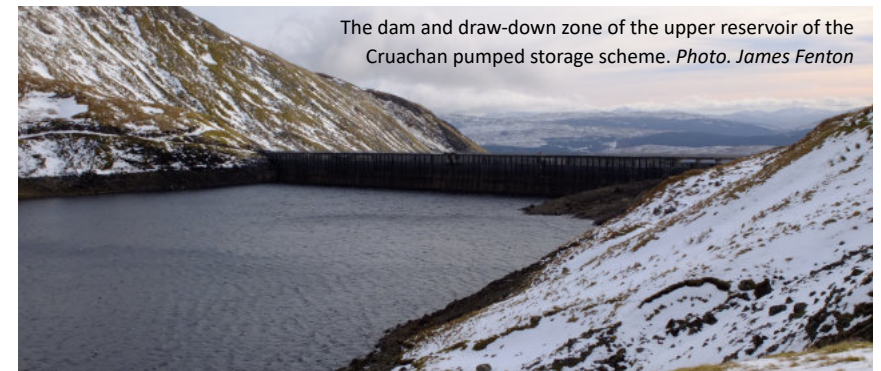
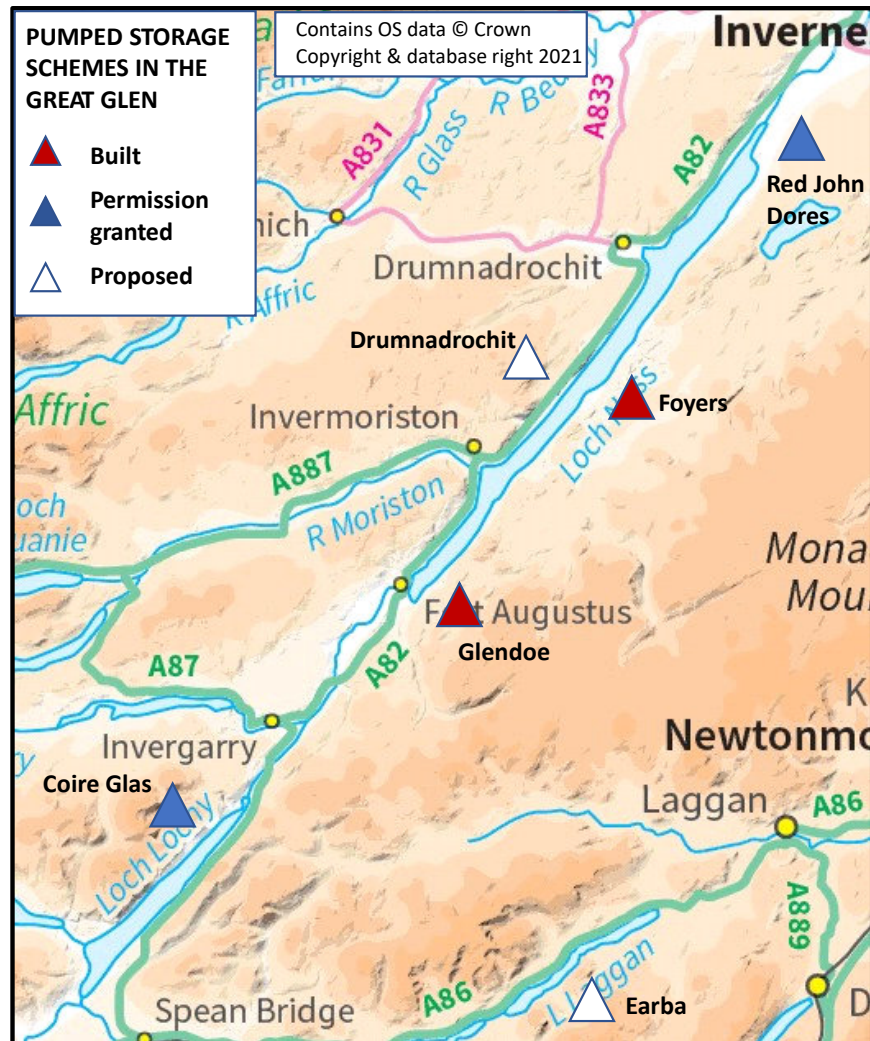
There is no avoiding ugly dams and draw-down zones around reservoirs, here Loch Cluanie. Photo. James Fenton

balancing the grid by producing a lot of power instantaneously, but for short periods only.

The question arises whether the ability to provide 900 megawatts for three days justifies a massive intrusion into Scotland's wild land. Wild land is becoming increasingly rare across the world as we fill up the land with infrastructure, and are places we should cherish rather than develop.

This location is popular with walkers, in an area where the two largest lochs in the area, Laggan and Erich, are already hydro-electrified.

To date, a scoping report has been sent to the government's Energy Consents Unit but no formal planning application submitted. This is one to watch if you wish to see wild land retained in Scotland.



The dam and draw-down zone of the upper reservoir of the Cruachan pumped storage scheme. Photo. James Fenton

Existing Loch Ness schemes

With its large deep lochs, the Great Glen is one of the best locations in Scotland for pumped-storage schemes. There is plenty of water in the lower reservoirs (Loch Ness, Loch Lochy) to be pumped up to the higher reservoirs. However, the upper reservoirs have to be constructed.

There are already two such schemes: the Foyers scheme of Loch Ness up to Loch Mhòr, and the Glendoe scheme of Loch Ness up to a new reservoir above Fort Augustus. Additionally, the smaller Red John scheme above Does has recently been given the go ahead. There have also been plans put forward in the past for a scheme south of Drumnadrochit from Loch Ness up to Loch nam Breac Dearga.

New Coire Glas scheme

SSE Renewables have previously been granted planning permission for the Coire Glas scheme, from Loch Lochy to

a new reservoir in Coire Glas, east of the summit of the Munro Sròn a'Choire Gairbh. It is now pursuing the project.

This will involve a new reservoir at 500m altitude, 1km long with a dam 93m high. The 1500MW turbines will be able to power 3 million homes for 24 hours. See details here: <https://www.coireglas.com/>

Because of the loch's size, the scheme will not result in a significant draw-down zone around Loch Lochy, although it will of course be apparent in the new upper reservoir. The site is not in a Wild Land Area, although immediately adjacent to WLA18. In addition to the dam and reservoir below the summit of the Munro, the project will result in the construction of new permanent hill tracks. It will certainly result in the continuing attrition of wildness in the Highlands, but has already gained permission.



Construction of the Glendoe reservoir in 2007 over blanket peat, at 630m in the Monadhliath. Photo. James Fenton

Bill Stephens

Renewables and our wild landscapes

We're bought and sold for English Gold,
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!
(Robert Burns)

National Planning Policy

In June 2014, a year after the 'Wind Farms Gone Wild' special issue of *Wild Land News* (WLN) No. 83, Scottish Natural Heritage published a map identifying the remaining core **Wild Land Areas**: "the most extensive areas of high wildness". At the same time the Scottish Government published the **Third National Planning Framework** (NPF3) and the **Scottish Planning Policy** (SPP), the relevant sections for windfarms and wild land from both summarised in James Fenton's Autumn 2017 article in WLN 91.

Briefly, NPF3 confirmed that windfarms are inappropriate in National Parks and National Scenic Area, acceptable locations elsewhere "taking into account important features including wild land". It also states that "strong protection for our wildest landscapes" will be continued with wild land identified as a "nationally important asset". It gives a target of 100% of gross electricity consumption from renewable energy generation with 50% by 2015: "We want to continue to capitalise on our wind resources, and for Scotland to be a world leader in offshore renewable energy. In time, we expect the pace of onshore wind energy development to

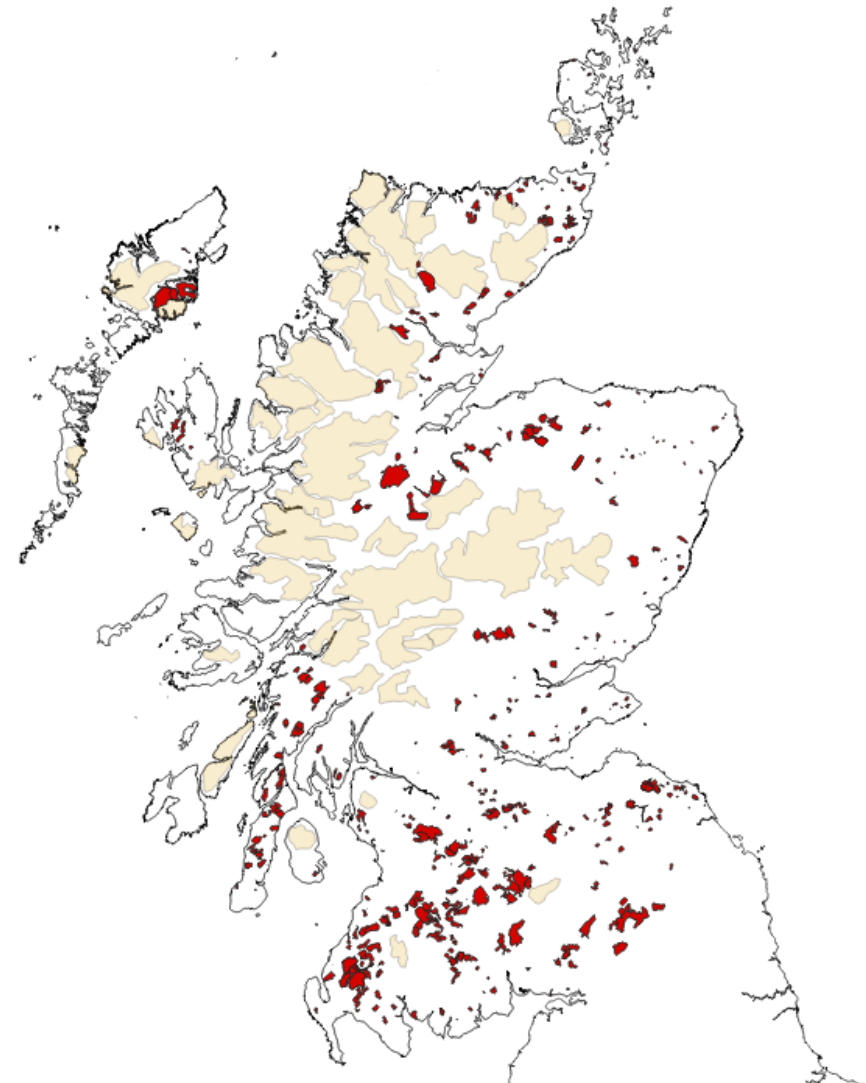
be overtaken by a growing focus on our significant marine opportunities, including wind, wave and tidal energy".

The SPP went further in highlighting the national importance of wild land: "Wild land character is displayed in some of Scotland's remoter, upland, mountain and coastal areas, which are very sensitive to any form of intrusive human activity and have little or no capacity to accept new development" but considered windfarms "may be appropriate in some circumstances", taking into account "the scale of the proposal and area characteristics, but are likely to include landscape and visual impacts, including effects on wild land". Any significant effects on the qualities of **Wild Land Areas** will need to be "substantially overcome by siting design or other mitigation": this is not quite the presumption that windfarms should not impact on wild land that many believed was the case.

The November 2020 **Position Statement for the Fourth National Planning Framework** (NPF4), that also replaces the SPP, is "driven by the overarching goal of addressing climate change" highlighting that "our places will look and feel different in the

Onshore windfarms installed, approved and scoping in July 2019 together with Wild Land Areas.

There is no recent data because NatureScot no longer has the funds to keep the map up to date. In June 2022 there was 8.6 GW installed capacity from onshore windfarms, with a Scottish Government policy to increase this to 20 GW by 2030. This is likely to include both more windfarms and taller turbines on existing ones.



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Windfarms are encroaching onto wild land



future. A significant shift is required to achieve net zero emissions by 2045”.

Key opportunities included:

“Supporting renewable energy developments, including the re-powering and extension of existing windfarms, new and replacement grid infrastructure, carbon capture and storage and hydrogen networks”.

Potential policy changes included

“Updating the current spatial framework for onshore wind to continue to protect National Parks and National Scenic Areas, whilst allowing development outwith these areas where they are demonstrated to be acceptable on the basis of site specific assessments”.

The direction of travel was confirmed in the November 2021 **NPF4 Consultation Draft** with support given to development proposals affecting National Parks, National Scenic Areas, Sites of Special Scientific Interest or National Nature Reserves “where the objectives of designation and the overall integrity of the area will not be compromised; or any significant adverse effects on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social, environmental or economic benefits of national importance”. A development proposal in an identified **Wild Land Area** can be supported where: it

“cannot be reasonably located outside; it is small scale directly linked to a rural business or required to support a “fragile” rural community; and “a site based assessment of any significant effects” is undertaken with “siting, design or other mitigation” minimising adverse impacts.

Consultation responses were split between those supporting a presumption against development on wild land and a strengthening of the policy with others concerned that the policy as drafted will effectively embargo development in **Wild Land Areas** impacting on both wind energy and local developments. The latter view was the one accepted by the Scottish Government with Policy 4g of the **NPF4 Revised Draft** published on 8 November 2022 indicating that development proposals in **Wild Land Areas** that help to meet renewable energy targets, or are small in scale for a rural business or community, will be supported with “wild land impact assessments” required setting out “how design, siting, or other mitigation measures will be used to minimise significant impacts on the qualities of the wild land”. The policy also makes it clear that: “Buffer zones around wild land will not be applied and effects of development outwith wild land areas will not be a significant consideration”!

After being ‘scrutinised’ by the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, NPF4 was approved without amendment by the Scottish Parliament on 11 January and adopted on 13 February, formally superseding NPF3 and SPP from that date.

Scrutiny of the NPF4 Revised Draft

Although the NPF4 Consultation Draft generated many responses from those supporting the protection of our wild landscapes, including those from the Scottish Wild Land Group, John Muir Trust (JMT), National Trust for Scotland, Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland, Mountaineering Scotland, Scotland’s Landscape Alliance and Scottish Environment LINK, the response to the 8 November 2022 Revised Draft was far more muted and very surprising given what it says about renewable energy schemes and buffer zones.

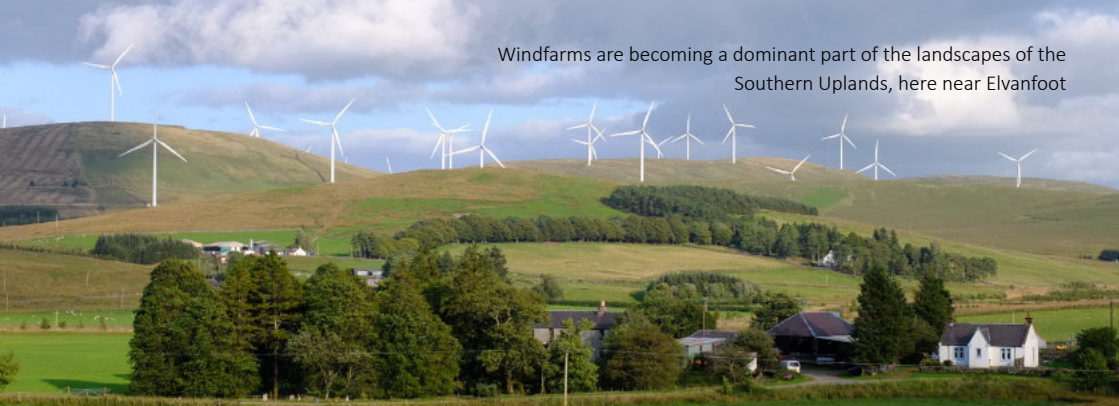
The same day the NPF4 Revised Draft was published, the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government, Housing & Planning Committee considered a ‘private paper’, presumably prepared by government officials, and agreed how it would be scrutinised and who to take evidence from. On 22 November evidence was heard from Scottish Renewables and Scottish Environment LINK with the John Muir Trust (JMT) providing a ‘briefing note’, and a week later the Minister and government officials appeared before the Committee. The draft report on the Revised Draft NPF4 was considered by the Committee on 13 December and the final version published on 21 December.

The evidence from Scottish Renewables noted that the NPF4 Revised Draft represents a “remarkable turnaround” and “probably represents one of the most supportive planning regimes for



The Farr windfarm at 500m in the Monadhliath in 2006. Note the people for scale. These turbines are small compared to more modern ones

Windfarms are becoming a dominant part of the landscapes of the Southern Uplands, here near Elvanfoot



renewables in the whole of Europe”. Scottish Environment LINK also considered it to be “vastly improved” with the emphasis placed on the climate emergency “strongly supported”, but suggested Policy 4g needs to be reworded to make sure allowing windfarms on wild land is “not going to have an impact on biodiversity and nature”, although no mention was made of landscape impacts.

The JMT ‘briefing note’ made a similar point that “we must have policies that ensure the benefits of renewable energy are realised in a way that does not destroy the nature-based solutions already available to us in the form of our wild places”. Again, no reference to landscape impact, with suggested revised wording to Policy 4g still accepting renewable energy development on wild land where this “is necessary for achieving the onshore wind energy target as set out in the onshore wind policy statement”.

The section of the Committee’s 21 December report on renewable energy developments referred to the “effusive comments” from Scottish Renewables and the “strong support” from Scottish Environment LINK with the JMT

concerns also highlighted. The Committee welcomed “the significant improvements that have been made to the policies on renewables ... We will monitor the effectiveness of these policies and the extent to which an appropriate balance has been struck between protecting wild land and progressing the development of renewables”.

Surprisingly, NatureScot was not invited to give evidence to the Committee but their views on the revisions to NPF4 are clearly set out in a 7 December report: “The focus on reducing carbon emissions, in particular the support for renewable energy will have significant implications on wild land and landscape. Protection for wild land is weakened and landscape in general less prominent throughout the document”. Other ‘Key Issues’ for NatureScot identified in the report include the “weakening of peatland protection in relation to renewables” and “fast tracking renewables with fewer apparent constraints”.

I had suggested to the SWLG Steering Group that amending NPF4 so that it now supports renewables on wild land and stipulates no buffer zones without

further consultation could be challenged in the courts. Similar legal advice was obtained by the JMT and a letter to this effect was sent to the Scottish Government on their behalf; but the response is not known, or if an application for judicial review is actively being considered.

As well as SWLG, I’m also a member of JMT, The National Trust for Scotland and Mountaineering Scotland and did try and initiate some urgent lobbying of MSPs before Scottish Parliament considered NPF4 on 11 January but got no takers. As a last throw of the dice, the Convenor and members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee were emailed on 9 January to bring to their attention the possibility of a legal challenge; and to highlight the views of NatureScot which they were not made aware of before finalising their report; and to point out that covering Scotland’s wild landscapes with wind turbines is the easy option when it comes to meeting emission with alternatives available.

Although welcoming most of the rest of NPF4, I argued “the only sensible way forward, to also avoid potentially expensive and time consuming legal proceeding, is for its approval to be deferred to allow the implications for Scotland’s diminishing wild land and valued landscapes to be properly considered and consulted on”, but it was too little too late and fell on deaf ears. The contribution to the 11 January parliamentary debate from the Committee Convener, Ariane Burgess (representing Highlands and Islands for the Green Party) made no

reference to the points made in my email and she felt that NPF4 is now “a much improved document” providing “a sound foundation for shaping Scotland” and “should have a transformational impact”. Perhaps she was thinking of the changes in prospect for our wild landscapes!

Her Green Party colleague, Ross Greer MSP, certainly made his views clear on this issue in a 15 January Tweet: “I’ll never understand people who claim to be ‘protecting Scotland’s unspoilt landscapes’ from renewables but who use images of desolate, sterile hillsides which have already been ruined for decades/ centuries...”

Onshore Wind Policy Statement and the Energy Strategy

An indication of what’s to come is given in the **Onshore Wind Policy Statement** published on 21 December 2022 highlighting that Scotland had 8.6 GW of installed onshore wind capacity in June 2022, with the Scottish Government having an “ambition” to increase this to minimum 20 GW by 2030 requiring “taller and more efficient turbines. This will change the landscape” (underlined in the Statement). “The only areas where wind energy is not supported are National Parks and National Scenic Areas”.

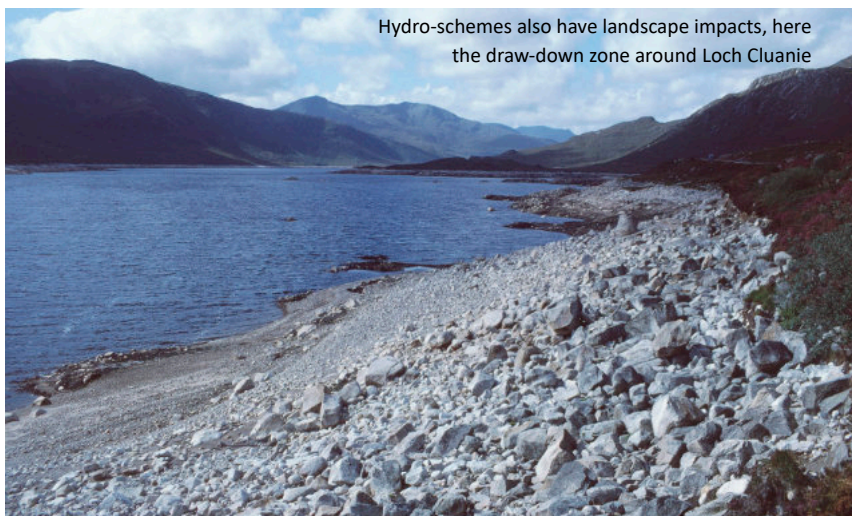
Then we had the **Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan** (ESJPT) published for consultation on 10 January and open for comments until 4 April. Its vision is for the transformation of Scotland’s energy systems by 2045:

“Scotland will have a flourishing climate friendly energy system that delivers affordable, resilient and clean energy supplies for Scotland’s households, communities and business”.

Difficult to argue with as a statement of intent, but the Minister also told MSPs when presenting the Strategy: “Scotland’s rich renewables resources means that we can not only generate enough cheap, green electricity to power Scotland’s economy but we can also generate a surplus and open up new economic opportunities for export” which the ESJPT highlights at least seven times: “Overall we are a net exporter of electricity and Scotland’s abundant supply of renewable generation exceeds Scottish demand ... Scotland has the potential to be a powerhouse for renewable electricity and renewable hydrogen for Europe, exporting clean electricity as part of an integrated system with the rest of Europe and supporting decarbonization of industry across the continent ... the significant increase in installed capacity of renewable generation ... could mean Scotland’s

annual electricity generation is more than double Scotland’s demand by 2030 and more than treble by 2045 ... linking Scotland’s datacentre industry with sources of renewable energy ... can position Scotland as a leading zero-carbon, cost competitive green data hosting location”.

The potential contribution of the various types of renewable (offshore wind, onshore wind, wave and tidal, solar, hydro and hydrogen) to energy supply is discussed in some detail, highlighting the 43.66 GW possible from offshore wind compared to the 1.85 GW operational in June 2022. Quantifying the demand side of the equation and the potential surplus for export is less specific, perhaps deliberately so, and others have also commented that the consultation “lacks transparency” with missing information. Elsewhere it is unequivocal: “Draft NPF4 supports development proposals for all forms of renewables, low carbon and zero emissions technologies including energy storage, such as battery storage and pumped hydro storage”.



Hydro-schemes also have landscape impacts, here the draw-down zone around Loch Cluanie



Even small hydro-schemes have landscape impacts, here within the Wester Ross National Scenic Area

Interestingly, the language used in the ESJPT is repeated in a 30 July 2022 ‘YES’ post hosted by the SNP with the heading ‘Scotland is a renewable electricity powerhouse’. The message is clear from the sub-headings:

Scotland produces more power than we need
England uses more electricity than it produces
Scotland is a net exporter of electricity, selling more than ever
England is increasingly reliant on electricity imports from Scotland
Scotland is leading a renewables revolution ... despite Tory energy policies that hold Scotland’s renewables industry back
Scotland has the power to thrive with independence.

Green Gold

Now we have Humza Yousaf, the new First Minister, calling for a “revolutionary increase” in Scotland’s renewable energy generating capacity

and a ‘Green Innovation Masterplan’ that could see a five-fold increase in green energy production. He argues this would help eradicate fuel poverty which, together with the greening of our energy supply, has to be a good thing, but up until recently I naively thought this was the motivation behind the ‘rush to renewables’. But it seems that replacing fossil fuel black gold with renewable green gold is more to do with boosting Scotland’s balance sheet to help make the case for independence.

As someone who has previously supported independence and voted for the SNP or Green Party, I have some sympathy with this but it cannot be at the expense of trashing our wild landscapes. It brings to mind the Robert Burns poem lamenting the 1707 Act of Union where Scotland’s independence was “bought and sold for English gold” but it’s now our wild land that is being traded.

It's not just the 40 designated **Wild Land Areas** that are being offered for sacrifice. Many of our other attractive wild landscapes also risk going 'under the hammer', with a windfarm on Faray in the Northern Isles recently approved by the Minister against the reporter's recommendation that it would "overwhelm" the landscape of the island and "greatly detract" from its heritage assets. The Scottish Borders, where I live, is now being inundated with a tsunami (or should it be hurricane) of windfarm proposals with turbines exceeding 250 metres in height across the Southern Uplands.

The 'sell-off' isn't just for windfarms with other renewable development queuing up, including pumped storage schemes. Although not yet built, the absolute gem that is Coire Glas, just to the north of Loch Lochy and immediately to the east of the Kinlochhourn-Knoydart-Morar Wild Land Area 18, is to be dammed to create a reservoir with a draw-down scar extending to some 600,000 square metres and the proposed Earba

scheme south of Loch Laggan significantly larger and almost wholly within the Rannoch-Nevis-Mamores-Alder Wild Land Area 14. A Scoping Opinion request for the latter was submitted to the Energy Consents Unit on 31 January and given reference ECU00004731. [see pages 12-14 above].

When will it end? Perhaps we need a contemporary Burns to step forward and tell us how it is, but those who care about our wild landscapes also have to get their act together and be more proactive which didn't happen after the NPF4 revised draft was published. Scottish Environment LINK are best placed to do what is necessary but landscape matters seem to have a low profile in their deliberations; I had hoped Scotland's Landscape Alliance might fill this vacuum but it hasn't happened yet...

Bill Stephens is a member of the SWLG Steering Group.

All photos James Fenton



Development in the high mountains, here the dam for the pumped storage scheme below Ben Cruachan. Renewable energy schemes, however well-intentioned, have a major impact on wild land whether or not formally designated as a Wild Land Area

Liz Mclardy

Pylons in my backyard

How big does your backyard have to be before you stop being a NIMBY and become a conservation campaigner?

My backyard is about to be desecrated by a double pylon line together with all the associated building works, and new access roads. My bigger backyard stretches from Spittal in Caithness to Beauly near Inverness, *i.e.* 170km of a double pylon line culminating in a huge new substation near Beauly. This is the Spittal – Loch Buidhe – Beauly 400kV Reinforcement line proposed by SSEN.

Unfortunately, my NIMBY label is exacerbated by the fact that this line is to cope with all the increased electricity generation produced by existing and proposed new windfarms in the North. That is: Renewable Energy. And once we bring the R word into play it's a done deal. Yes of course we need to find better way to produce energy, but is it right to try and solve one environmental problem by causing another?

Coming back to my bit of the yard. The line [double line] plus the new access road will go through some very beautiful and wild land. It goes along the shore of a beautiful upland loch, Loch nan Bonnach. This is a place well

loved by locals. It's wild but accessible, with a bit of effort.

It's surrounded by areas of upland peat bog and craggy outcrops and is home to all manner of wildlife. Its bird life is renowned and includes the ever-scarcer lapwings and curlews, osprey, whooper swans and last year a breeding pair of red-throated divers. It's visited by eagles both golden and white-tailed. The water from the loch is of such a quality that it is used by the local distillery to make their famous single malt.

Maybe I needn't worry. SSEN, who have proposed this route, say that they will 'leave the environment in a measurable better state than before development'.

Is this line necessary in the first place? Evidently a lot of the power is going to markets far removed from the generation site – England, for example, where they are saying they don't want on-shore windfarms. Looks like the NIMBY word is also applicable here.

Why cannot these turbines be placed in areas nearer to the market they serve, and why cannot they be placed on already industrialised land? At the moment the planning of the location of windfarms does not take into

Loch nan Bonnach: pylons will go along the shore line. Photo: Val Ross



account the need to minimise the need for grid upgrades. There are 13 new windfarm proposals for the north of Scotland and SSEN is obliged to 'offer non-discriminatory terms for connection to the transmission system, once these plans are approved.'

Back to my backyard. Its all a bit ground-hog day as we have been here before with plans for industrial forestry plantations, and rights of access difficulties. These always seems to be driven by the same desire to make money out of land that is conceived as worthless, as its off the beaten track, not visible from a main road and only matters to a few unimportant locals. And it's all dressed up in green credentials: trees/renewables.

I'm not a scientist. I have no expertise in botany or soil types or birds, and I'm making a fuss about my backyard. But is it really wrong for me to say this is a lovely and wild place which should not be ruined because it's a cheap and relatively easy option to do so?

But it's not just my yard. This is a massive stretch of 170 km across some amazing country. This land may not

house a rare plant or have labels denoting it as more important than other places, but surely in these days of discussing mental health more freely, we can admit to finding lovely places important for our health, mental and physical. Is it too insipid a sentiment to say "these are beautiful places, appreciated by so many people and important because of this alone, never mind the conservation value of preserving them"?

Can we look beyond the buzz words and see that this is a project that is poorly designed, disguised with a massive PR exercise, and maybe even unnecessary in the long run. If anyone can help, please do get in touch at: lizmclardy1@gmail.com

Editor's note. details of the proposals can be found here: <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/project-map/spittal-loch-buidhe--beauly-400kv-connection/>

In view of local concerns, SSEN has recently announced an extension to the consultation deadline.

Can we look beyond the buzz words?

Bill Stephens

Rockets galore in our wildest landscapes

Watching the opening sequence of the first episode of 'Wild Islands' brought back memories of a sea kayaking trip around the north coast of Shetland where we surprised the Muckle Flugga lighthouse keepers (it's automated now). Despite its height above the sea, the lighthouse windows were covered in a strong steel mesh to provide protection from storm driven rocks and we were shown the anemometer where the winter before a wind speed of 150 knots was recorded underlining how 'wild' it can be here.

Continuing our journey in more benign conditions, we landed on the north coast of Fetlar enjoying 'da simmer dim' camped on Urie Ness. The following morning was dreich and, breakfasting on warm muesli, a gang of gulls at the far end of the ness were also in a feeding frenzy with the reason soon obvious ... all two metres of it.

The dorsal fin of a bull Orca, soon joined by three others making up a family pod that had left behind the remains of a seal the gulls were now squabbling over. The pod continued west following the tide and was about 500 metres away when another seal was spotted bolt upright and almost clear of the water looking intently in

their direction. Soon only the largest and one other fin could be seen but close inshore a surface wave was fast approaching...the other two Orcas going in for another kill.

Suddenly they did a U turn towards where we stood. The Orca calf was swimming in mum's slipstream and when only metres away, eye contact, the unforgettable moment of being given the once over by the youngster. Had mum noticed us standing there and wanted to show her offspring what humans looked like?

There was no time to take a photograph and, even if there had been, the chances of capturing the fleeting instant were slim to nil. At the time I'd thought that the large brown iris looking at me was due to the peaty inshore water but later learned Orca have the same eye colour range as humans. It showed no fear or even curiosity, displaying what seemed mild indifference and why not. As the top predator of the seas, known to attack even a blue whale and originally known as whale killers, not killer whales, humans should be of little concern.

But, as we all know too well, industrialisation of our planet is



Photomontage of the proposed space port on Lamba Ness on the northeast of Unst. *Screenshot from website*

polluting our oceans with noise from ships, military activity as well as offshore wind farms impacting on cetaceans with their sensitive hearing. And now we have rockets...

Described as the 'Great British Space Race' to launch satellites into low earth orbit, five of the seven contenders are in Scotland, two of these on rockets fired from converted jumbo jets taking off from Prestwick and Machrihanish with the three others on vertical ground launched rockets from sites in North Uist, Sutherland and ... Shetland.

The 'Saxavord Spaceport' site is at the end of the Lambaness peninsula east of Muckle Flugga that was previously part of a RAF early warning radar facility but, having kayaked along the

coast, I know just how remote and wild it is. The end of the ness is now a large building site and the first rocket launch is anticipated later this year. One of the reasons the site was chosen is because the used rocket stages, or in the case of a malfunction the whole thing, can fall into the sea without risk to humans. Shame about Orca or other wildlife.

'Spacehub Sutherland' on the A'Mhoine peninsula west of Tongue was granted planning permission in 2020 but work has yet to start on the ground and hopefully never will. Although not as remote as the Shetland site with access from the A838 Tongue to Durness Road, it's on the edge of the Ben Hope-Ben Loyal Wild Land Area with the latter often referred to as the 'Queen of Scottish

Mountains'. Rocket launches will be clearly visible from the Bens and hardly compatible with the "strong qualities of sanctuary and solitude" mentioned in the WLA description.

Why are new rocket launching sites needed?

The Kyles of Tongue to the east of the launch site is part of an extensive National Scenic Area with the rest of coastline to the north and west a Special Landscape Area. As its name suggests, the peninsula is mostly peatland, the main attribute of the Flow Country proposed as a World Heritage Site, with nearly all of it a Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area or Ramsar site.

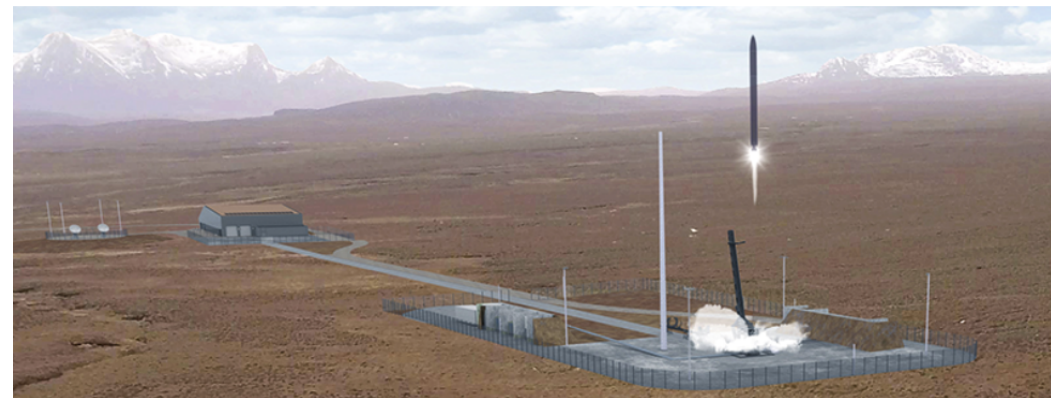
Hard to imagine a site less appropriate for launching rockets but Scolpaig on the west coast of North Uist and the site of 'Spaceport 1' is even more worthy of protection. Scolpaig Bay is part of Special Protection Area and Beinn Scolpaig within a National Scenic Area and, although the A865 is

close by, it carries few vehicles and the area feels wild and remote, one of the reasons you'll find me there every year in early September.

A planning application for the Spaceport, reference 21/00646, was submitted more than three years ago but determination has been awaiting the submission of supplementary environmental information. Military rockets have of course been launched from the Outer Hebrides since 1958 with the South Uist facility still operational and why we need another one has not been explained.

The question also needs to be asked why rocket launching sites are needed. Is not Prestwick and/or Machrihanish sufficient and, if vertical launched rockets are necessary, do we need all three contenders in our wildest landscapes?

Photomontage of the Sutherland Spacehub, with Ben Loyal & Ben Hope in the background. *Screenshot from website*



Mark Aitken

The Cuillin: Skye's magnificent and inspiring mountains

The Cuillin landscape has long been an inspiration for many, including writers, poets, artists, hillwalkers, mountaineers and musicians. The Cuillin is our wildest and most spectacular mountain range in the UK. Its hills rise up dramatically from the sea, forming a complex tangle of steep, rocky summits and jagged pinnacles, linked together by sharp serrated ridges above deep rocky corries. Traversing the Cuillin ridge and visiting its remote corries gives me an overwhelming feeling of landscape wildness awe and appreciation.

I've previously completed several traverse across the Cuillin ridge with

friends, and now wanted to solo it over a more leisurely three days to fully appreciate its wild nature. This would give me extra time to visit some of the outlying and more remote peaks, and also to complete a slightly longer route. From Glen Brittle, I hiked to Loch Coir' a Ghrunnda surrounded by its huge gabbro boiler plate slabs. I then scrambled along to Gars-bheinn, the Cuillin's most southerly peak, via Sgurr nan Eag and Sgurr a' Choire Bhig. It's just under Munro height so it's rarely visited by most hillwalkers. On a previous visit here, I've watched two sea eagles carrying out a spectacular courtship display. I've also



Loch Coruisk cradled by the Cuillin, from Sgurr na Stri

Sgurr Alasdair (highest) viewed from Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh



seen golden eagles and ptarmigan on this peak – a great wildlife haven. Gars-bheinn is a great looking peak that's magnificently sited above the coast, with outstanding views of sea, lochs, mountains and islands.

I could see Loch Coruisk 900 metres below, in folklore its reputed to be the home of kelpies. This dramatic and remote area was saved from trackway development over 50 years ago. A route was partly bulldozed out in 1968 as part of a plan to improve access to Loch Coruisk from Kilmorie. The track made it as far as Camasunary but proposals to press on round the coast were rightfully abandoned following an outcry from mountaineers. If this outcry had not happened, the beautiful and unspoilt Loch Coruisk may have been changed forever.

It was tempting to stay and enjoy the views, but I re-traced my steps and then climbed Sgurr Dubh an Da Bhinn

followed by Sgurr Dubh Mor. I then returned to the main ridge and walked up to the cave just below Bealach Sgumain. From there I scrambled up Sgurr Sgumain and then to Sron na Ciche. These peaks are not on the main ridge but I was keen to see the Cioch again, a remarkable rock feature. It's a mecca for rock climbers, and also famous for the sword fighting scene in the film Highlander. I then returned to Sgumain's cave and scrambled up the SW flank of Sgurr Alasdair. All the main peaks in the Alps, including the Matterhorn were already summited long before Sgurr Alasdair was first climbed in 1873 by Alexander Nicolson. The other leading pioneers and heroes of Cuillin exploration and first ascents were Norman Collie and John Mackenzie, and there's a sculpture celebrating their remarkable achievements opposite the Sligachan.



Climber on Sgurr Mhic Choinnich with the In Pinn, Sgurr na Banachdich and Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh in background

Alasdair is a very shapely summit, and because of its height and position, its views are incredible. I looked out across the sea to Rum, Muck, Canna and Eigg and the other islands of the Inner and Outer Hebrides. Much further in the distance, way beyond North Uist, I could just make out another island. With astonishment, I realised I was looking at St Kilda. I could also see countless mainland peaks, including Ben Nevis. I then looked back to Gars-bheinn and felt satisfied how far I had come. However I then looked northwards to Sgurr na h-Uamha and realised I still had a lot further to go!

I descended until I could readily start scrambling up Sgurr Thearlaich. From this summit I scrambled down the tricky and exposed north ridge towards the Bealach Mhic Choinnich. I took great care with the route finding because on previous visits I'd gone off

route and had to re-trace many steps. From the bealach I climbed up to Collie's Ledge. On earlier visits, I've enjoyed climbing King's Chimney to Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. This is a delightful rock climb up a corner with good holds. However it's not a route I would solo, and so Collie's Ledge was an enjoyable alternative. I gratefully followed this sensationally exposed path until I could turn right and easily reach the summit of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich .

It was 6pm by the time I descended to Bealach Coire Lagan and I was feeling tired. After a drink and rest, I felt ready to tackle one of my favourite parts of the ridge. I was soon enjoying scrambling up An Stac direct, which is a steep and very exposed ridge straight to the summit. I then had a short and easy down climb to the Inaccessible Pinnacle (In Pinn).

I then climbed the In Pinn's narrow and sensationally exposed East Ridge, and abseiled down the west side. The sun was low so I prepared a brew and a meal at my bivvy site on Sgurr Dearg. While snuggled in my bag, I watched a vivid sunset behind the Outer Hebrides. I later saw many stars during the night, including two shooting stars. I woke early and watched the sky slowly change colour from dark to gold across a narrow horizon. The golden horizon widened, and it was wonderful to see the light slowly illuminating the Cuillin. This inspired me to repeat last evening's climb up the In Pinn, before I descended towards Coire na Banachdich for water and then breakfast.

I then traversed the tops of Sgurr na Banachdich, followed by Sgurr Thormaid. Here I enjoyed seeing several ptarmigan, now in their summer grey plumage. Next was Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh by its south ridge which provided excellent scrambling, particularly the dramatic ridge between its two summits. I was pleased to eventually reach An Doras, the half way point of the ridge. I was also excited and slightly apprehensive by the tricky and committing route to follow. It felt different and more serious to be alone, compared to my previous traverses with friends. Some of the moves across Sgurr a' Mhadaidh and its tops looked very intimidating. However there was always great holds

Sgurr nan Gillean viewed from Sgurr Beag



available, and the rough abrasive texture of the gabbro gave me the confidence to climb and enjoy this section.

Bidein Druim nan Ramh followed and this was similar terrain. It's one of the lowest summits on the main ridge but it's a complex set of tops. The route finding is not obvious and there are several tricky and committing moves. From Bidein's main summit, I used two abseils during the descent, and then climbed its North top on steep rock. Next was the narrow ridge up to An Caisteal, and then a tricky descent involving one awkward abseil. The technical difficulties then relented and it was easy to traverse the minor top of Sgurr na Bairnich, and from there to gain the crest of the easy south ridge up to Bruach na Frithe.

I had planned to continue further along the ridge, but right next to the summit was a good bivvy site. Bruach na Frithe is also one of the best viewpoints on the Cuillin. It was too tempting, so I bivvied here. I excitedly looked forward to another display of sunset, stars and sunrise. Nan Shepherd wrote that "no one knows a mountain completely until you've slept on it". She described sleeping on mountain summits as "one of the sweetest luxuries in life". I too love the simplicity of a night on a summit, the views, the closeness to nature and the elements; gazing up at the stars and watching the sky change through the night. As the sun started to set, I

watched the peaks of Basteir and Gillean briefly glowing a ruby colour as the last rays of sun illuminated them.

I woke early and over coffee watched the sun slowly rise and the central peaks turn rosy during a brief alpenglow period. This inspired me, and I was soon off, and completed the easy ascents of Sgurr a' Fionn Choire and Sgurr a' Bhasteir which are often by-passed. I then reached the bottom of the remarkable rock fang of Bhasteir Tooth. I by-passed this on its northerly side and then climb up and down Am Basteir by its straightforward East ridge. After this I climbed Sgurr nan Gillean by the very enjoyable West ridge. Near the top I passed the adjoining Knight's Peak which is part of Pinnacle ridge, my favourite route onto the main ridge.

I spent a long-time resting on its summit, enjoying the wonderful panorama of mountains, moor and sea lochs. I could also see the entire Cuillin ridge and many mainland peaks. The view of Am Basteir was particularly dramatic, and Bla Bheinn looked majestic. The John Muir Trust owns Bla Bheinn and adjoining estates. This will safeguard the Estates' wild landscape for current and future generations to enjoy, and to benefit the rich diversity of wildlife it supports.

To the west, the sea shimmered in the sun, and the Outer Hebrides were a clear blue, from Barra Head in the

south to the Butt of Lewis in the north. There was also a great view of the Red Cuillin and further north I could see the Trotternish hills, particularly the Storr.

After this enjoyable view and rest, I set off to Sgurr Beag, followed by the beautifully shaped peak of Sgurr na h-Uamha, the true end of the main ridge. Although it's 200 metres lower than most of the Cuillin, it provides a worthy finale, with outstanding views, including to Harta Corrie and its infamous Bloody Stone.

I had now completed one of the slowest ever traverses of the Cuillin ridge by anyone, and had by-passed three of the technical climbing pitches, but I still felt enormously satisfied and happy with my traverse. There is something very fulfilling about completing a long solo route across wild land. It had been an enjoyable adventure from start to finish, and I felt extremely grateful and inspired for all my experiences in the wild and magnificent Cuillin.

As I descended down to Sligachan, I thought of the words of WH Murray who, after completing the greater ridge traverse in one day (including Bla Bheinn), wrote that it was "the longest and grandest day's rock climbing that we shall ever carry out in Scotland – or anywhere else in the world". When Tom Patey completed the first winter Cuillin traverse, he wrote that it made him "a little older in wisdom, a little younger in spirit". Finally I thought of John Muir who said "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn." I smiled and agreed with all of them.

Mark Aitken is a member of the SWLG Steering Group.

All photos Mark Aitken

It is fulfilling to complete a long solo route across wild land

Looking south from Bruach na Frithe along the Cuillin ridge



Dennis Smith

Varieties of wildness

Wild Land News No. 101 (Autumn 2022) contains two thought-provoking articles which raise questions about the nature of wildness. Reviewing Dieter Helm's book *Green and Prosperous Land*, Tim Ambrose ponders the use of financial penalties and incentives to 'rescue the British countryside' (to paraphrase Helm's sub-title). And James Fenton considers the Arctic tundra as an example of wild land and the threats and opportunities facing it. As he says, wildness can be interpreted in many different ways, referring to land unaffected by human activity, land inhospitable to human settlement or land that humans value as wild for social or spiritual reasons.

We don't have to choose one definition and reject the others. An area may satisfy one criterion or more, and different definitions may suit different purposes. But I want to complicate the issue by floating another possibility. In his book *Regeneration* (p.93) Andrew Painting asks: "Is being wild simply having the ability to do the unexpected or even the harmful, beyond the control of human interference? Is wildness equal to freedom?" This suggests an idea of wildness as something essentially beyond human control, maybe even beyond human understanding. Nature is wild if it has a degree of autonomy, particularly vis-a-vis *Homo sapiens*.

Can we make sense of this idea? One way might be to picture nature as a system of sub-systems, a totality of ecosystems which are to some extent self-regulating while also interacting unpredictably with one another, and always exposed to the risk of collapse through some external catastrophe. Systems like this are complex but not necessarily internally consistent: they may involve inter-species competition and conflict as well as symbiosis – nature red in tooth and claw. In global terms inconsistency and conflict may not be a bad thing. In Darwinian terms, greater diversity implies greater capacity for random mutation, which could in turn imply greater resilience and ability to resist systemic shocks.

This suggests a critical link between wildness and (bio)diversity. Diversity should be considered a good thing unless proved otherwise, while monoculture should be suspect. This has implications for both the articles cited. Tim Ambrose is tempted by Dieter Helm's suggestion that natural resources can and should be quantified and monetised in the shape of 'natural capital'. It is not easy to reconcile this kind of lumping with the call for diversity. It may also underestimate the role of sheer human ignorance: we can't rationally predict the relative value of goods in

Being in the wild may resemble listening to a symphony or watching a great play

the distant future. Monetisation or commoditisation commits us to dependence on a single metric (finance), where resilience may favour diversity. It involves a big gamble on the rationality of markets. (Don't put all your eggs in one basket.)

Something similar might be said about the valorisation of Arctic tundra. As James Fenton says, low temperatures mean that Arctic soils have low fertility, producing relatively simple ecosystems compared – say – with Amazonian rain forest. If we want to connect wildness with autonomy, we need to think of autonomy in relative terms. Some ecosystems have greater autonomy than others. In theory, a system's autonomy might be measured in terms of its dependence on external inputs and also of its own internal resilience. (Does it generate negative or positive feedback loops?)

This line of thought raises deep questions about the relation of mankind to nature. The whole idea of natural capital can be criticised as anthropocentric: it asks what nature is worth to us (*Homo sapiens*), not what value it has in itself or for the rest of

the biosphere. It risks placing *Homo sapiens* outside, or even above, the rest of nature, rather than as an integral (though influential) part of a larger system. Some people might use the term 'speciesist' here – a difficult and controversial idea.

These arguments may be criticised for abstraction and a bias towards complexity. They downplay (it may be said) the human need to pursue wildness as a path to simplicity, to escape the overwhelming complexities of modern (human) life. I'm not sure this objection holds. It is no doubt true that ecosystems involve feedback loops of infinite complexity, which we can never hope to understand completely. The work of scientific enquiry is unending. But understanding is not the same as experience or perception. We may understand intellectually that something is hugely complex but still apprehend it as a single unified whole – an aesthetic, possibly almost religious, experience. In this respect being in nature or being in the wild may resemble listening to a symphony or watching a great play – complexity fused into unity.





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Please notify us if you want to cancel this declaration, or if you change your address, or if you no longer pay sufficient tax on your income or capital gains. If you pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you should include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.

Please post this form to: Tim Ambrose, SWLG Treasurer, 8 Clevedon Road, Glasgow G12 0NT



Scottish Wild Land Group

Working to protect Scotland's species, environment and landscapes



Liathach by James Fenton

The objects of the Group are:

- (a) To promote the conservation of wild land in Scotland;
- (b) To promote public awareness of the problems facing wild land in Scotland;
- (c) To promote and encourage the implementation of good planning policies;
- (d) To co-operate with other bodies to promote the foregoing objects.

We campaign for:

- ✓ Protection and promotion of Scotland's wild land
- ✓ Safeguards against inappropriate windfarm and other developments
- ✓ Environmentally-sensitive land and wildlife management
- ✓ Planning controls on the spread of hill tracks
- ✓ Restoration of rare and missing species and environments
- ✓ Connection of habitats and protected areas to allow ecological recovery and species movements

We are Scotland's oldest and only volunteer-run wild land charity

Join us today at www.swlg.org.uk



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