

**WILD LAND NEWS 73: Summer 2009**  
**Letter to the Editor: more on wild land mapping**

**Steve Carver writing in response to David Jarman**

David makes some valid points in his response to the article *Mapping wildness in the Cairngorm National Park*<sup>1</sup>, and directs us toward issues that he, correctly, feels need further debate and attention. In his letter *Mapping Wild Land – the fatal flaws*<sup>2</sup> David argues that mapping wildness is “simply wrong for Scotland” and picks fault with the approach suggested. While I appreciate that there is more than one way to crack a nut, David fails to make any considered suggestion as to an alternative approach beyond an overly simplified and naïve mapping of land use categories. As hill goers we all know that any map is not perfect, and as readers of WLN we know that the challenges posed by mapping something as subjective wildness are many. However, I would counter that not to try is tantamount to negligence. I will therefore, if I may, respond to some of the points David raises, but before I do I’d first like to clarify that I don’t see the wild land scene in Scotland in quite so black and white a fashion as he suggests, and second point out that the original article was written to describe the work done for CNPA/SNH in the 'gorm and so shouldn't be looked on in isolation. So, do we rise to the occasion and meet the developers and renewables lobby head on by playing them at their own game? Or do we act like so many frightened ostriches, pretend that doing nothing is the best policy and bury our heads in the metaphorical sand?

In his letter David set out by suggesting that "Bureaucratising wild land can only diminish it". However, the alternative is a far less savoury option, because if we don't defend our arguments in support of preserving wild land and, indeed, creating more using all available methods - including GIS mapping - then wild land is ultimately doomed. Planners and policy makers understand maps and numbers and, as history shows us, these bean-counters and their well-paid legal counsel have little time for heart-felt pleas however reasoned or eloquent. Nor is the kind of mapping we develop here the only way forward, but should be seen as a positive move towards a rigorous and scientifically defensible argument that will stand up to detailed scrutiny in today's climate of evidence-based decision-making. The argument about developers, QCs, etc. using wild land maps as the basis for justifying developments cuts both ways, and surely it is better to have a map to use as the basis for informed debate and decision-making on defending wild land and promoting its values than not and risk the gradual and, in some cases, dramatic erosion of wild land that will surely occur without it? The pro-wild land lobby needs to be as informed, if not better, than the pro-development lobby if we're to win through.

David goes on to identify "Three fatal flaws that bedevil any attempt at quantifying wildness". Firstly, he says that Scotland is “unnaturally wild”. Agreed, ecologically speaking there is no land in Scotland - or anywhere in the world for that matter - that is ecologically pristine. No one ever said the maps purport to map ecological wildness; that is a very different, if complementary, challenge. Everywhere, even the frozen wastes of Antarctica, has been affected by us in one way or another. But wild land is more than just ecology; it's about landscape values... of remote, rugged and challenging land that is devoid of obvious human intrusions... an "unnatural" wild as David puts it and this is just what we set out to map in the Cairngorm. Secondly, David maintains that some people see Scotland as “a wasted land”. The idea of wild land or the perception of wildness is again what we attempt to map in the Cairngorm, and both the report for CNPA/SNH and the article in WLN state this very clearly. While sensitive to the cultural view of the Highland landscape as "emptied, not empty" I would challenge that few would want to return to a pre-clearances landscape and society. Times change, society changes and landscapes change with it, along with our perceptions of what is and what is not of value. I can't alter my Englishness, but if 91% of Scots think wild land is important and worth preserving then that's a majority in anyone's book. The "wasted land" argument is something of a political red-herring, and in any case a quick look at the RCAHMS<sup>3</sup> data shows that some glens in the

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<sup>1</sup> CARVER, S. (2009) MAPPING WILDNESS IN THE CAIRNGORM NATIONAL PARK. *Wild Land News*, SPRING 2009: 10-16.

<sup>2</sup> JARMAN, D. (2009) MAPPING WILD LAND – THE FATAL FLAWS. *Wild Land News*, SPRING 2009: 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE ANCIENT AND HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF SCOTLAND.

Highlands were never occupied and have, together with the higher elevations, always been a 'wild land'. Finally, David tells us that "wildness is entirely subjective" or, in other words, Scotland is an 'experienced wild'. Agreed, but if we don't try and pin down those areas we collectively call wild, then how (returning to the argument above) do we defend it against development? Or use the maps as tools for targeting areas for restoration projects and (re)wilding? The method developed is universally applicable, be it in the Cairngorms or the Western Highlands and Islands or, indeed, in North America. It is based on flexibility of definition and priority of inputs and so can be tailored to any and all local conditions. The map shown on page 15 of the Spring 2009 issue was only one example. Running the model with inputs from many different people simply improves the robustness of the outputs and should begin, with successive iterations, to show the core wild areas that the majority of people value most. If that includes the A9 corridor and the A889, then so be it.

At last, David points out an alternative and "simpler approach". No, I fail to agree. Wild land is about more than just land use and David understands this as well as I. As a starting point and as an indicator of where to look it's not bad - we used perceived naturalness of land use as one attribute in the Cairngorm model - but other attributes of wild land are well recognised such as remoteness, ruggedness and lack of visual intrusion from human artefacts and these combine to influence our understanding of wild landscapes. Using land use alone grossly over-simplifies the problem. How can a small, football pitch-sized patch of waste ground (the *prima facie* 'other') in the centre of Glasgow be described as wild... not at least in the sense of what we're talking about here? Similarly, how does a small patch of plantation forestry impact on the wildness of the flow country? Of course, each in isolation can be called 'wild' or 'artificial' but in terms of the wider landscape setting they are clearly neither.

David's "final flaw" argument is a commonly made mistake. I am very much aware of the scale issues here, and as a "professional geographer" perhaps more so than most. Scale, value and sense of place are inextricably linked and need to be viewed in context. A small patch of undeveloped land at the end of my street was my personal wilderness when I was at primary school and I was gutted when they built houses on it. Now the wilder parts of the Yorkshire moors have local importance to me, and yet they are nowhere near as wild as large tracts of the Highlands. At a national scale I very much value the Cairngorms as the part of the Highlands I am most familiar with, but even this area pales in comparison to say the vastness of the 'true' wilderness to be found in places I've been lucky enough to spend time in like Siberia, Greenland and Alaska. The point of this approach is that it is flexible and it would be wrong not to model it in this way since the alternative of sharp edged maps of 'wild/not wild' as used in Australia and North America simply don't work in the smaller, more heavily impacted and altered landscapes found in the British Isles.

The final paragraph in David's letter is contradictory to his opening argument. If the Scottish government wishes to stop the rot then they need to commit to mapping it, and then use the maps to identify core wild land areas and grades of wildness beyond that (viz Rob McMorran's wild land typologies report for SNH<sup>4</sup>). They can then use these in the decision-making process about which landscapes to protect and which to restore to a wilder state by removing hill tracks, plantation forestry, fences, footbridges, etc. thereby reversing the tide of wild land losses. We need to think more positively about this, work together for a common cause and take appropriate action. Failure to do so, will surely lead only to greater development in inappropriate locations leading to further losses of wild land. So, my challenge to you all is this: let's work together, embrace our differences and collaborate to use all the tools at our disposal to save whatever wild land we have left and promote the creation of more wherever possible. United we stand, divided we fall.

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<sup>4</sup> MC MORRAN, R., PRICE, M.F. AND MCVITTIE, A. (2006). A REVIEW OF THE BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES ATTRIBUTED TO SCOTLAND'S LANDSCAPES OF WILD CHARACTER. SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE COMMISSIONED REPORT NO. 194 (ROAME No. F04NC18)