

SCOTTISH WILD LAND GROUP

CONVENOR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2017 – 2018

The past year has been as busy as ever for SWLG. There are so many issues impacting on our delivery of our charitable aims and objectives that we have to be selective in those we become involved with. In this respect our partnership in Scottish Environment LINK network is invaluable, as expertise and tasks are shared across the 36 member organisations. LINK members share in responses to major consultations, whether from Government or SNH or others, and response documents are circulated for additional comments and member organisation sign up to indicate their support. This enables us to participate where otherwise we would not be able to and to greatly reduce our workload. In addition, we have access to the LINK Parliamentary Advocacy Team, which has been extremely helpful in achieving meetings and exchanges with MSPs and Ministers and giving political advice, particularly in our on-going work on hilltracks.

We continue to work with other NGOs via the Groups and sub-groups in the LINK network, on planning, landscape issues, wildlife matters and wild life crime. Our Treasurer is also the LINK Treasurer and our Convenor is the co-convenor and depute convenor of two LINK subgroups. Such participation at a minimal cost is invaluable to a small voluntary charity like ours in keeping up to date, accessing areas of professional expertise we lack, engaging in advocacy, raising our profile and being involved in the issues of the day that may affect our core interests.

One significant piece of work this year was the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR]. It was decided that we should contact all members individually either via email where we could or by letter. This was very useful not only in checking the accuracy of the membership data we hold and deleting information that we do not require, but also in the personal contact and feedback from members that resulted. Much of the latter was very heartening as many members sent personal notes of encouragement and appreciation, and some enjoyable correspondence. Every member who responded was thanked. It has to be said, though, that 44% of our members have yet to let us know their wishes on how we they want us to contact them and their data that we hold for these purposes.

Membership levels have remained stable but we should like to recruit a few more of course! Chasing up subscriptions is always a time-consuming task for Grant Cornwallis, our membership secretary, and he does this most effectively, but we should prefer more members to arrange their subscription renewal by bankers order.

Since the last AGM James Fenton has edited 3 editions of Wild Land News, and all have been well received by members, as judged from the ensuing correspondence. We are always keen to depict fine landscapes in the magazine – and also it has to be said, photos of inappropriate developments, so if you are a good photographer, please contact James.

I had hoped that the Steering Group could address a couple of governance matters during the course of the year. It would be useful if we became a SCIO rather than just a Scottish Charity, for various reasons, and updating the constitution remains an outstanding task. There have simply been so many matters to address that these ambitions have not yet been pursued.

The 2017 AGM was held at the Birnam Centre for the first time and was well attended. We much appreciated the inspiring illustrated talk given by Chris Townsend on his travels along the Scottish watershed, which provoked many questions.

We are constantly alert for development proposals that might impact on our wild land resources and as far as we can, we respond to such planning applications as we judge to be of concern. This is a time consuming task; it is not enough to simply object, a judged consideration has to be presented if we are to have credibility and maintain our reputation. All of our responses and letters are listed on the website and can be viewed by clicking on the links. Since the last AGM we have commented on the following full applications:

We objected to the proposal for a golf course and associated services at Coul Links in Sutherland, in December 2017 to the Highland Council. This proposal is inappropriate in this location on several grounds and undesirable precedents would be set if consented. This has since been called in by the Scottish Government under pressure from a well run media campaign. We have been invited to participate but do not have the resources for this, but will support other conservation and environmental NGOs in their participation.

In January this year we objected to the Invervar Lodge track extension in Glen Lyon as we felt the application had not justified the need for the track or clarified its purpose. The track was consented by Perth and Kinross Council, however.

In March we objected to a west-facing artificial ski slope application in Coire Cas of Cairngorm, located above the car park, intended for use by beginners and intermediate skiers, by Natural Retreats, who lease the ski centre from HIE. We were relieved when the National Park Board turned this down but we await the developer's next move.

Recently there were proposals for no less than 7 run of the river hydro schemes in Glen Etive. We objected to 3 of these due to their potential impacts on wild land and commented on a fourth. The outcome of this is not known as yet.

Throughout the year we have commented on various prior notification proposals for hilltracks, after assessing concerns such as the justification for the track, whether permitted development rights apply or not, construction details and possible natural heritage impacts. Although planning websites state that public comments will not be accepted on permitted development proposals, we have found that they respond to our concerns, so it has been worthwhile to ignore this statement and to pursue our concerns. Obviously, there are issues around the fact that, as the public are undemocratically excluded from commenting on prior notifications, inappropriate practices could be allowed under permitted development rights.

In this area of our work, the major effort has been directed towards the LINK Hilltracks campaign, which I co-convene with Helen Todd of Ramblers Scotland. The campaign has now been running for well over 5 years and this year we chose to use the opportunities potentially afforded by the Planning Bill currently going through parliament to further our aspirations. Our report, written by Mel Nicoll, was launched in September accompanied by a full media campaign which was very effective. Helen and I were interviewed for the Out of Doors programme and Helen was on BBC radio Scotland and the TV news. As members will be aware, Andy Wightman MSP submitted an

amendment at Stage 2 of the Bill, and members were encouraged to write to their MSPs to ask for support. The amendment was debated by the Local Government and Communities Committee, where it was rejected by a 5:2 vote along party lines, despite Andy giving a very reasonable and persuasive presentation of his justification for the amendment. This again generated a huge amount of social media traffic. Helen and I have since met with Andy and he is determined to pursue a further amendment to Stage 3, so we are currently supporting that process. We will be calling on our LINK partners in the campaign, as well as Mountaineering Scotland and the JMT, to support us in our endeavours by encouraging their members to write to their MSPs.

Our efforts to achieve and uphold our aims and objectives could not be sustained without an effective team. The efforts of the members of the Steering Group, despite being few in number and all being volunteers, including some with busy jobs, have been vital and are very much appreciated in achieving what we have this past year.

Beryl Leatherland November 2018

Convenor