

WILD LAND NEWS 56

Winter 2002/3



COMMENT

Article

Welcome to the new-look Wild Land News - after 20 years we decided to give the magazine a facelift.

2002 was a notable year for us. The International Year of Mountains helped to focus public attention on our wild land resource and encouraged us to look at it in a global context. In the same year we saw the inauguration of Scotland's first National Park in Loch Lomond and The Trossachs. The significance of wild land was given a huge boost when both the National Trust for Scotland and the Scottish Executive's own agency, Scottish National Heritage (SNH), produced separate policy papers specifically on the subject - these are examined elsewhere in this edition of WLN.

The foot and mouth outbreak of 2001 had devastating repercussions for the tourism industry, and the experience gained played an important role in the re-shaping of the Access section of the Land Reform Bill, which has continued its progress throughout 2002. A recent VisitScotland survey showed that visits to the countryside for "walking" are worth £438m to the economy, while earlier research by the Scottish Tourist Board and SNH found (not surprisingly) that 90% of visitors associate "beautiful scenery" with Scotland prior to their visit. The economic importance of our wild land is becoming firmly established.

Nevertheless, it takes time before all this recognition trickles down to become crystallized into legislation giving real protection to our heritage. We in SWLG are constantly aiming at a moving target as newly-emerging technologies put new pressures on the landscape. The mobile phone revolution has seen telecommunication masts popping up everywhere as companies strive towards saturation coverage. And the demand for alternative energy sources has forced us to oppose certain wind and hydro projects, inevitably exposing us to taunts from our critics of being against renewables.

It was against this background that we decided to publish our booklet *Scotland's Wild Land - What Future?* We asked ten leading figures to produce articles on the subject of wild land, and the result is a well-balanced overview, reflecting on how we define and value wild land and how we aim to protect it for future generations. The booklet was produced in time to be included in the conference pack for delegates at the IYM/SNH conference reported on in this edition of WLN. It has been subsequently been distributed to all members and several libraries, and publicised by some like-minded organisations. We hope to achieve much wider circulation in due course.

Policies for Scottish Wild Land

Article

Fiona Anderson examines the policy papers on wild land produced by three major organisations.

The International Year of Mountains in 2002 has encouraged several organisations in Scotland to go into print about the guidelines they use or intend to use for their own management or use of wild land areas. This is a subject central to our concerns in SWLG. Articles by two organisations, Scottish Natural Heritage and the National Trust for Scotland, together with one by a former President of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, appear in our recently published booklet *Scotland's Wild Land - What Future?* They reflect a concern

that has been growing in several countries with remote mountain areas. In Scotland Percy Unna of the Scottish Mountaineering Club set out principles for "maintaining land in its primitive condition" as long ago as 1937, and active voluntary organisations like ourselves in SWLG and the John Muir Trust were set up in response to perceived threats to wild land from particular development proposals, from the late 1960s onwards. These threats result from modern lifestyles, particularly increased mobility in forms of recreation and tourism, location of work and residence, or ways of managing estate land, and from forces of economic and land use change such as remote mineral development, afforestation, telecom masts or increased priority for renewable energy - wind turbines and hydro-electric schemes. But it was the last decade of the 20th century before the extent of these threats finally persuaded the public agencies that respond to development proposals or manage large areas of land in the public interest to formalise their policies. It took as long as this because the value of wildness as a national asset is not easy to define, and is contentious in many remote parts of Scotland.

Mountaineering Council of Scotland

A single interest voluntary organisation, the MCoFS was actually the first to approve a suite of policies in successive AGMs from 1989 to 1995 for Access and Conservation of the hills, including policies for forestry. They realised that access and conservation are inseparable, that the quality of the mountaineering experience has become as much of a key concern as access itself. On Development in Mountain Areas their policy is to oppose generally developments which are large scale, insensitively sited, which would concentrate patterns of activity and particularly which would reduce the ever-decreasing pool of wild land in Scotland - for example proposals requiring access roads. As a rule of thumb they define land which is 5 kilometres, or one hour's walk, from a public road as remote, though they reserve the right to define other land as remote (such as some rough, uncultivated land eg Glen Torridon, Glencoe or Rannoch Moor that is effectively difficult of access but abuts a main road,) and will there consider cases on their merits.

On Footpaths and Erosion and on Hill Tracks and Vehicles they are most concerned at the reduction in the quantity of wild land remaining in Scotland resulting from the bulldozing of hill tracks, but also cases of new footpaths, chairlifts and bridges. They favour the long walk in as the best means of protecting remote and fragile land, and will resist any development of footpaths if it falls within a remote area, (as defined earlier), except where footpath repair becomes necessary to prevent further erosion. They will oppose any hill track development that erodes remoteness, as remoteness is in itself a precious resource that they have a duty to preserve, and also an effective method of conserving the mountain environment. They will seek removal of unnecessary hill- tracks and restriction of off track use of four-wheel-drive vehicles, ATVs etc as well as use of footpaths by motorcycles or mountain bikes, by means of bye-laws, user codes and other educational devices. They are also concerned about the emphasis placed in guidebooks and other publications on certain routes up hills or into remote land which tends to channel walkers and increase erosion, and will attempt to use information management techniques to redress this.

Scottish Natural Heritage

SNH as the Government's advisor on natural heritage matters has been working for some time on a policy for Wildness in Scotland's Countryside, following publication of NPPG 14 Natural Heritage by the Scottish Office in 1998. This stated that "some of Scotland's remoter mountain and coastal areas possess an elemental quality from which many people derive psychological and spiritual benefits. Such areas are very sensitive to any form of development or intrusive human activity and planning authorities should take great care to safeguard their wild land character." Wild Land is defined as "uninhabited and often relatively inaccessible countryside where the influence of human activity on the character and quality of the environment has been minimal."

SNH's policy appeared as a consultative draft in 2001, and was finalised in August 2002. Its approach is to define wildness as a quality that can be enjoyed in the countryside more widely than only in the core wild land areas of the north and west, ie the places where wildness is best expressed. Relative wildness can also be found in more managed countryside, even close to towns, because wildness is a quality experienced by people in different ways in response to places of a certain character, or according to their experience or sensitivity. The attributes of seemingly natural terrain, drama or beauty in the landscape, absence of human artefacts or structures, a sense of inspiration or awe, a degree of physical challenge, a feeling of isolation, sanctuary or solitude, and a sufficient extent of area - or combinations of these attributes can be experienced in a number of different locations in the countryside not solely dependent on remoteness.

Defining wild land is particularly difficult when perception of it varies between individuals, but is necessary to enable Councils to conserve and protect their valued areas and to determine where development may or should not go. A mechanistic approach, which assumes that mechanised access to remote areas is a significant threshold to people's perceptions of human intervention, identifies core areas of wild land mostly in north and west Scotland at varying distances, typically 5 kms from the public road network. If the analysis extends to areas distant from any motorable road, public or private, the core areas tend to become fragmented. But the previous definition, first used by Dr R Aitken in 1969, and by MCoFS above, includes most parts of Scotland which have been judged by experts, including the National Scenic Areas, as the finest of our wild land. They are not all mountainous, and include areas such as the northern peatlands, which have strong qualities of sanctuary and are of high aesthetic quality and wildlife value.

SNH goes on to define the common physical characteristics which planning authorities might use to identify wild land areas. These include remoteness, ruggedness, and absence of recent human construction. They are also typically dominated by functioning "natural" habitats and landform processes, and they will tend to be extensive, though some smaller areas or islands may have strong wild character. Intrusive features may not disqualify an area if their impact is limited, and peripheral areas (eg closer to roads) may be important to safeguard to prevent gradual erosion of the core. SNH's recommendations for the management of these areas are set out in their article in our booklet (see above)

SNH has also produced guidelines on the siting of certain potentially intrusive developments, including windfarms and marine fish farms, which emphasise the need to steer development away from wild land. They have been looking at the wider effects of "permitted development" according to planning regulations, such as farm and forestry tracks, outwith NSAs where they are controlled. The necessary techniques for restoration of bulldozed tracks can now be recommended to Councils from various demonstration sites, including the National Trust for Scotland's work on Beinn a' Bhuid. SNH sees the most pressing need for the future as encouraging wider public recognition of Scotland's wild areas as a contribution rather than an obstacle to a sustainable rural economy.

National Trust for Scotland

In January 2002 the NTS Council approved a Wild Land Policy intended to give clear guidance for the management of all the Trust's properties containing wild land or having wild qualities. The Unna Principles are still their key reference point for mountainous properties, and played a key part in their thinking about management of properties such as West Affric and Mar Lodge in the 1990s.

NTS sees the need to define wild land quality as one attribute of a landscape for which there may be a number of objectives. In areas where wild land quality is highest these objectives should be given priority. Wild land is defined primarily from a recreational view as "relatively remote and inaccessible, not noticeably affected by contemporary human activity, and offers

high quality opportunities to escape from the pressures of everyday living and to find physical and spiritual refreshment." A list of indicators that can critically affect the character and quality of wild land and the experience of those enjoying it is given in The NTS article in our booklet *Scotland's Wild Land - What Future?* They are divided into Enhancers, Detractors and Neutral indicators.

The list is not exhaustive and could be extended. The overall assessment for a property or part of a property with wild land qualities will be based on experience and judgment. Defining significance in terms of wild land quality will normally involve zoning of properties to identify areas to which the policy will apply. It is hoped that the indicators can be used both to confirm the relatively few, large, core areas of high wild land value that the Trust owns, and to identify smaller pockets of less remote but relatively wild land.

Management of them will avoid any reduction in wild land quality as a general principle, but thereafter the emphasis and resources will depend on the overall significance of different features at a property, such as visitor management, treatment of paths or fences that have impacts on the landscape. The work should be unobtrusive and sensitive, and where possible wild land quality will be enhanced by measures such as promotion of the long walk in and removal of intrusive high altitude tracks.

The NTS goes on to propose advocacy of wild land protection and management on areas outwith its ownership in order to help create a national constituency on behalf of the relatively few, large remote areas still remaining. People need to be engaged at all levels, as visiting remote areas will always tend to be primarily for the relatively fit and able and those prepared to develop the necessary skills. Almost everyone can however experience a flavour of the character of relatively wild areas nearer to home, if access is facilitated for the less able or experienced. Joint working with SNH and Environment Link is proposed to develop a national strategy, and a NPPG is called for to stimulate identification of smaller pockets of

Conclusion

It is hard to conceive of three approaches to wild land definition and management that are more distinct and different than these, bearing in mind that MCofS policies were drawn up in the early 1990s and the other two at least 5 years later. Yet all three give a common description of the main threats and are unanimous in stressing the importance of preserving remote or wild land. The two organisations that have to respond to development applications all over Scotland (MCofS and SNH) both see the need to adopt a simple rule of thumb definition of 5 kms from a public road, and both give indications of how they will deal with cases that fall outwith that definition. NTS does not need a definition on its properties, but like SNH it lists the attributes of wild land which will help it define the management needs of each area. Only MCofS has developed forestry policies applying to remote hill land access (not detailed here.) Both NTS and MCofS see the need for national definition of core wild land areas to ensure there is no further loss. NTS and SNH both indicate willingness to co-operate with other bodies to promote examples of best practice and both see the need for a national constituency on behalf of the few large wild land areas remaining in Scotland.

Progress on access

Article

Alistair Cant reports on the land reform legislation.

The detailed study at Stage 2 of the access part of the land reform legislation has been completed, with the Bill seeing almost four times the previous highest record number of amendments. Clearly a topical issue!

Though a number of issues have been resolved, there are still some key ones outstanding. There is still a clause which excludes the right of access on land on which crops are growing. This needs to be amended so that access to such land is within the right; whereas damaging crops puts one outwith the right of access.

On the issue of access through farmyards in order to reach the land and hills beyond, an amendment to allow access where no alternatives exist was not passed, though the Scottish Executive plan to try and devise wording that would meet the intention of the amendment.

Another key issue still to be sorted is in relation to the powers of local authorities, and discussions are still continuing on this between the Scottish Executive and COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities).

The Bill reaches its final stage - Stage 3, probably early in the New Year. This will be a full parliamentary debate on the Bill and any further amendments. It is crucial for this final debate that MSPs are lobbied to support progressive amendments, so as to ensure that the worthy aims of this part of the land reform legislation is translated into real benefits.

AGM Report - May 2002

Alistair Cant reports on the visit to Schiehallion and the AGM at Dunkeld.

The AGM day started in the Schiehallion car park where Wild Landers were met by Paul Jarvis, a Trustee of the John Muir Trust. Paul welcomed everyone and explained briefly the history of the JMT purchase of the east half of Schiehallion. He then went on to cover the exciting plans for a new path up the hill along the east ridge, so that the heavily eroded existing path can be 'removed' by careful re-landscaping.

JMT have accessed over £1/2 m Heritage Lottery Fund money to assist with this initiative, and have just recruited an experienced manager, Chris Cairns, to co-ordinate all this work.

Our group went up the east ridge, and the low cloud cover meant that the mess of the current path was not obvious, until we squelched down through it from the top.

Paul also informed us that a new Trust has been formed locally, involving 10 Community Councils and other local organisations and people. The Highland Perthshire Community Land Trust had just bought Dun Coillich, the hill to the east of Schiehallion. More low-lying than Schiehallion and covered mainly in heather, the hill had been the run for an adjacent deer farm. The farm had closed and the Trust were able to buy the hill without any farmed animals at all. This bodes well for regeneration. The new Trust aims to have a strong educational role for local children, and is an interesting new element in the diverse types of ownership locally.

The Wild Land Group AGM was held in that evening in Dunkeld, and co-ordinator Alistair Cant outlined the activities of the last 12 months, most notably the activity around the Land Reform legislation and the impact of foot and mouth disease.

Tim Ambrose, the Treasurer indicated the finances were healthy, and funds are being applied this year for a special publication in this International Year of the Mountain. Copies of the Accounts are available from the Treasurer as always. The Steering Team was then re-elected and there are still places available if anyone is interested.

The AGM finished with a talk from Andy MacPherson, the IYM co-ordinator. The scope of the IYM project was outlined, and a discussion followed as to how it would integrate with the

work of SWLG and other organisations. The talk was lavishly illustrated with splendid slides showing Scotland's mountains at their best.

In defence of outdoor writing

Article

Chris Townsend responds to an article in "Scotland's Wild Land - What Future?"

In his feature "When guidebooks aren't always good books: the dying art of exploration" in the "Scotland's wild land" booklet Dave Hewitt attacks guidebooks, guidebook writers, guidebook publishers, guidebook users, mountain photographers, mountain coffee table books, outdoor writers, outdoor magazine editors and outdoor magazines. This is rather a long list - potential supporters all - for the SWLG to offend so here I'd like to mount a defence and rebut some of Dave Hewitt's points.

I had better declare an interest before I launch into my argument. I have written guidebooks and I write regularly for outdoor magazines, specifically TGO, one of two magazines singled out by Dave Hewitt for criticism. I even write about gear, something he regards as a blight. I've also been a member of SWLG since its early days and I am very concerned about the conservation of our wild lands.

Dave's case is that there is a decline in exploration by hillgoers and that the outdoor publishing industry is at least in part responsible for this. Firstly let me say I don't agree with the basic premise. I don't think that walkers are any less exploration minded than in the past because I don't think that most walkers ever were interested in exploration. I have no statistics to back this up but I doubt Dave has for his view either. I have however been hillwalking since the early 1960s and walking in Scotland since the mid 1970s and in that near enough 40 year period the vast majority of people I've seen on the hills have been on footpaths. And the same hills have retained their popularity during that time. I learnt many, many years ago that it was easy to find solitude on even the most popular hills simply by leaving the paths or choosing ones not marked on the map or listed in guidebooks. I've been using guidebooks to decide where not to go for a long time.

I see no reason though why walkers should feel exploratory. I like venturing onto rough terrain and finding my own way round the hills but I have no objection to people who prefer to stick to footpaths or like walking in popular places. Yes, this can lead to erosion and unscrupulous landowners may try to keep people from venturing off corridor routes (though I see few signs that this is a problem) but it's not a reason for encouraging people to leave the popular paths or denigrating those who don't. Many people don't want an adventure; they just want an enjoyable walk in fine scenery.

Guidebooks are, as Dave says, everywhere. With such a vast quantity quality is bound to vary and there are some pretty awful ones and also some excellent ones. Why are there so many guidebooks? Because people buy them. Why do guidebooks usually cover popular areas and often the same routes? Because these are the guidebooks that sell most copies. In other words guidebooks to popular areas are what people want. Most people don't have that much time to go to the hills so when they do go they want to see the well known and famous areas on the basis that these are likely to also be the most attractive. I can sympathise. In the Eastern Highlands, where I live, I often spend time on little visited, little-known hills but when I visit an area unknown to me I want to see the best it has to offer.

At the same time I do think guidebooks should encourage walkers to expand their horizons and visit places they might not have considered otherwise. Many guidebooks do do this. The two I have written, covering the Isle of Skye and Ben Nevis & Glen Coe in the Collins Rambler's Guide series, contain a mix of popular routes up popular hills and far less popular routes to rarely visited places. There are serious scrambles in these books too - Aonach

Eagach and Sgurr nan Gillean for example - and the publishers never suggested I should remove any route due to the "liability-fear" Dave mentions. There isn't even a disclaimer in the books.

Many guidebooks also have colour photographs (mine do, as do the SMC Guides and many others) and some merge into coffee table books, which Dave blames for causing people to go to craggy, spectacular hills as these look best in the pictures. He even makes a guess that less shapely hills have suffered a decrease in visits as the amount of glossy photographs has increased. I would be very, very surprised if this was so. I suspect these hills have never had many visits. I also think that the vast majority of walkers are well aware that the weather is often wet and dull. They don't however want to look at pictures of such weather at home. They want to see what the hills would look like if they could see them.

On a more serious environmental point coffee table books play a large part in convincing people that wild areas are worth protecting. A superb photograph of a beautiful place can really be worth a thousand words. I doubt a picture of mist shrouded, rain sodden moorland would persuade anyone to do anything. Books like "The Magic of the Munros" and "The Magic of the Corbetts" are useful and important tools in defence of wild land because of the stunning photography.

Of magazines Dave says there is a "dearth of intelligent, enthusiastic, hands-on editorship". I think he is completely wrong. I've been reading outdoor magazines for thirty years and writing for them for over twenty and I think we have as good or better magazines now than we have ever had, mostly edited by keen, knowledgeable outdoors people who do a good job. Dave suggests digging out a magazine from 15 years ago and making a comparison. A few years ago I actually did this, looking through copies of The Great Outdoors (as TGO was then known) from 1981-85 as research for an article. I was astonished at how much space was given over to gear reviews and route descriptions, far more than in TGO today. There was also a far higher proportion of pages given over to advertisements. Commercial magazines were just as market driven then as they are now but today there is more not less of the "genuine writing" Dave wants to see. Take the November 2002 TGO. It contains well-written, interesting features on Mount Olympus (by noted mountaineer Stephen Venables), on Drove Roads, on night hiking and on the Loch Treig Munros. Of the regular columnists Jim Perrin writes on the Dyfi Hills, which he describes as neglected by walkers, Mike Harding has a humorous piece on OS maps on CD-ROM and Dave Key discusses the difference between travel through and within wilderness, the latest in a wilderness philosophy series called Wild At Heart. Cut-out-and-keep walks? There are four pieces that could just about be described thus though they're not step by step route descriptions. They include a feature on crossing passes while avoiding summits in the English Lake District and another on walking on Unst in Shetland. Only a description of a round of the Carneddau hills in Snowdonia could be regarded as covering a popular walk. The gear reviews Dave abhors are there - written by me as usual - but there are no product placements in editorial, something I have never seen in TGO or any other outdoor magazine. Of course there are pictures of walkers wearing or using identifiable gear. That has always been the case. The first issue of TGO had a well-known tent on the cover. Products are unavoidable if people are to appear in photographs.

TGO heavily promoted the International Year of the Mountains and has a strong environmental and pro wild land ethic. Other magazines are similarly committed. Climber is especially noteworthy here with a regular column from Bill Wright of the Cairngorms Campaign and frequent pieces from Alan Blackshaw. To say the outdoor magazines have abdicated from their responsibilities and no longer lead is simply untrue.

The enemies of wild land are the people who want to dig quarries, bulldoze tracks, build funicular railways and otherwise develop the hills. To protect wild land requires the support of many people, including guidebook writers and outdoor magazine editors. SWLG should be encouraging them to support conservation not publishing pieces attacking them. We need to be united.

Alistair Cant reports on a pioneering project in the north-west.

A very interesting project has been undertaken in Wester Ross - a National Scenic Area (NSA). Wester Ross has been chosen as a pilot to produce a Management Strategy for the NSA, which has been in existence for 20 years. The project was organised through Highland Council and Scottish Natural Heritage. It is hoped that this approach of a comprehensive management strategy could then be replicated in other NSAs throughout Scotland.

A local working group was established and extensive consultation took place. The Scottish Wild Land Group were invited to comment on the draft Management Strategy in May ([Read our response](#)). This draft was very effective in describing and analysing the key elements that comprise landscape character and scenic qualities. Often these attributes are not given much study in reports on the assumption that everyone 'knows' a fine landscape such as Torridon or Assynt, and that not much else needs to be said.

However a careful description of a landscape both helps identify the key elements that, if removed, would 'weaken' the character; and allows substantive grounds for objecting to developments that would harm the key qualities.

The NSA strategy almost became too comprehensive in that we felt that by listing all the issues and threats, the key ones became diluted by other relatively minor ones. In Wester Ross we see key issues being ones such as new hydro schemes, overgrazing and overzealous fencing.

There was a slight danger that this management strategy could become turned into a local economic development plan, and it is crucial to not lose the focus on the landscape, the wild land issues and the key role these play in the area. The report showed the fundamental role played by the mountains, the rivers, the lochs and the sea in Wester Ross, and the benefits that flow to the locality from such a wonderful landscape. The report did highlight one element often missed from official reports - the promotion of 'quiet enjoyment' as a major asset for an area.

As ever in reports trying to reach a balance or consensus, big issues are identified - such as the need for sustainable management of resources, such as grazing, fish resources and open hill land. However when the action programme involves setting targets for individuals and groups operating locally, the changes aimed for become scaled down. For example under the heading of grazing management, the deer management groups are to be positively supported to take account of the aims of the NSA. This seems very weak when looking at issues of huge deer numbers and the excessive use of fencing as a consequence.

The publication of the strategy caused some local controversy, as reported in the West Highland Free Press. Some people complained of knowing nothing about the project, which is strange in view of the extensive local consultation, whereas others saw the report as a stepping stone to the designation of the area as a future National Park, and thus a serious threat.

It is clear that to achieve good progress locally takes enormous amounts of time, resources and commitment as people wish to be convinced before signing up wholeheartedly. The difficulty is in ensuring the bigger picture and national issues are assessed and prioritised. Hard decisions really need to be made to protect and enhance the very landscape qualities that define this and other similar areas.

Overall the strategy is very worthwhile, though unfortunately the funding for the project worker has come to the end of its timespan and we wonder how much will now be achieved without this focus.

Parliamentary Duty in the Cairngorms

Article

Dave Morris, Director of Ramblers' Association Scotland, reports on progress establishing a Cairngorms National Park.

In the next few weeks we will discover if the proposed Cairngorms National Park is a source of pride or embarrassment. Two committees of the Scottish Parliament, transport and environment followed by rural development, have to decide whether to approve the Designation Order which formally brings the park into being. For Labour politicians in particular it marks the end of a long campaign.

John Smith, the former Labour leader, active hillwalker and vice president of the Ramblers' Association, would have been well aware of the benefits that a long overdue national parks system would bring to Scotland and to the Cairngorms in particular. Sadly, Smith is no longer with us to pull on his boots and tramp these hills. Unfortunately he might be trembling in those boots if he knew what sort of national park was in prospect.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Scottish Executive seem quite content to create a national park which commands only limited public support and is likely to be embroiled in controversy from day one. Their apparent willingness to ignore the results of public consultation is depressing. No matter that well over 80% of respondents said that the national park authority should be responsible for development control, no matter that Scottish Natural Heritage (acting on behalf of the government) indicated that it was "essential" for the mountain slopes of Highland Perthshire to be in the park in order to meet the legislative criteria laid down by Parliament, no matter that Perth and Kinross Council and local communities from Blair Atholl northwards agreed. Disregarding all this the Executive reversed its previous support (in September 2000) for the boundary proposed by SNH and proceeded to lop around 500 sq kilometres off the recommended park area. This 25% reduction in size has produced a boundary which runs right through the core area of remote land in the heart of the Cairngorms. Walkers, climbers, ski tourers and other visitors approaching from the south will already be inside this tract of remote land, the largest in the UK, before they encounter the park boundary. In terms of visitor management, interpretation and education such an arrangement is plain stupid. Furthermore, key mountains and unspoilt river systems that drain the southern slopes of the Cairngorms will lie outwith the boundary. The chances of such an area being recognised as part of the international family of national parks and perhaps gaining the status of World Heritage Site are negligible.

The Executive have struggled to explain their apparent indifference to public opinion, especially when SNH gained widespread commendation for the thoroughness of the public consultation exercise, its inclusivity and the resulting well argued recommendations. The impression has been given that the boundary has been adjusted to meet particular interests within the Highland Council area rather than the Cairngorms as a whole.

Speculation is also increasing on the role of land owning interests on this process. The present boundary neatly excludes areas of land which are known to experience difficulties from excessive numbers of red deer or the low breeding success of predatory birds. Such estates do not readily welcome the presence of the general public or officials acting on behalf of public bodies. Nevertheless, it is astonishing to discover that the designation order for the Cairngorms makes no provision for the national park to have its own ranger service. I can think of no national park anywhere else in the world, which suffers from such a deficiency. Provision for a ranger service was made in the Draft Designation Order but was quietly removed by the Executive before the order was laid before Parliament. This will ensure that

no national park rangers will be crossing land where activities or situations embarrassing to certain estates might be discovered.

We have been here before. When the Draft Land Reform (Scotland) Bill was published in 2001 it was obvious that powerful land-managing interests had been very active behind the scenes in persuading the Executive to abandon much of the agreed consensus that had emerged from the public consultation process. The result was seriously flawed proposals for access legislation, which have only been corrected through vigorous campaigning by environmental and recreation bodies followed by intense scrutiny and amendment by the Parliament's Justice 2 Committee. Indeed those MSPs who now have to decide the fate of the Cairngorms National Park would do well to follow the example set by Labour MSP Pauline McNeill. As Convenor of Justice 2 she has ensured, with the strong support of Committee members of all parties, that the Executive has begun to act more on behalf of the public as a whole rather than a handful of excessively influential land owners. The Cairngorms deserve an equally fair treatment.

For Labour and Liberal Democrat members of the Scottish Parliament any delay in establishing the Cairngorms National Park is a bit of a worry. The coalition partners made a commitment to have the park up and running before the end of this Parliament. But a delay of a few months now would be sensible. It would allow corrections to be made, notably to the boundary and to the arrangements for a park ranger service. Then we might get a national park that commands widespread support from the foothills of the Cairngorms to the hearts of our cities. It is the least we can do for the memory of John Smith.

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Footnote: On 12th December 2002 the Scottish Parliament finally gave the go-ahead for the Cairngorms National Park, despite widespread and deep-seated misgivings among MSPs about the Designation Order.

Editor

Major IYM conference - 'Nature and People'

Article

Scottish Natural Heritage in conjunction with the Centre for Mountain Studies at Perth College organised a major international conference in early November as part of the International Year of the Mountain. The sub-heading for the event was 'Conservation and Management in the mountains of Northern Europe'.

Held over 3 full days, plus an evening reception, this was a well organised and well attended event with strong representation from Scandinavian countries, both in terms of speakers and delegates. With a comprehensive set of papers, handouts and many 'posters' - displays on research and other activities - the delegates were not going to complain about a lack of meat.

The topics covered a wide range, and some might say it was too eclectic; however it was good that the many different strands of activity involving mountains were highlighted. The speaking ability was variable but those given the shortest amount of time seemed to make the best use of it.

The best line of the conference for me came from a quotation repeated by one speaker, that: "Sustainable Development is like teenage sex - everyone says they are doing it; very few actually are; and those that are, are doing it badly".

Overall the fundamental role played by mountains around the world came across very well, and it was certainly established that Scotland's mountains are a key asset in so many ways. The network links established between the different disciplines and delegates during the conference period were very worthwhile.

Alistair Cant

Attadale Bulldozed Track

Article

Work began last summer on a new bulldozed track on the 32,000 acre Attadale estate east of Loch Carron in Wester Ross. The 3-metre wide track runs northwards from a point (NH 018392) just north-east of Bendronaig Lodge.

As the track follows the line of an existing narrow path, it seems the estate might get away with this latest piece of landscape damage on the grounds that it is an upgrade and therefore classed as "permitted development". Last year a much longer track was bulldozed from Bendronaig Lodge to Pait Lodge, 10km to the east.

By the time 500 metres of the new track had been carved out in July, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland intervened to challenge the view that this was "permitted development", and asked Highland Council to issue a Stop Order. Work did indeed stop, but according to the estate owner, Ewen Macpherson, this was only because of the imminent stalking season and the operation would be completed in 2003. It is understood that the track is to run for 3km in a north-north-westerly direction along the foot of Bidein a' Choire Sheasgaich.

Once again, this controversy demonstrates the failure of the planning system to deal decisively with major threats to our wild landscape heritage. Bendronaig Lodge is near the heart of a huge tract of roadless terrain containing some of the remotest Munros and where there is a genuine feeling of isolation. It is an outrage that vehicle tracks can be allowed to penetrate ever deeper into such a landscape. Mr. Macpherson claimed of such low-level tracks that "Within five years you will not be able to see them". Who does he think he is kidding?

We shall make our feelings known to Highland Council about this, but what is really needed is legislation to prevent this type of development from bypassing the planning process.