



Scottish Wild Land Group

Convenor's Report 2015 to 2016

Our efforts to contribute to the protection of our landscapes, especially wild land areas, and all we associate with that, such as their biodiversity and ecology, continued over the past year. There are many challenges, not the least of which is the Scottish Government's focus on "sustainable economic growth"; their adherence to this concept seemingly overrides all other considerations.

We nevertheless submitted a number of objections and contributed our views on various development proposals. These included, for example, several letters of objection to the proliferation of upland tracks that we consider to be unjustified and unnecessary, to the retention of some of the Beaulieu-Denny construction access roads; applications to construct Hilltracks and a couple of hydro electricity run of the river schemes in scenically sensitive areas, some of which were also proposed in designated areas. A significant example of this was the proposal for Ardessie Burn in the north west, which James Fenton of the Steering Group responded to on our behalf. I should point out that we are not totally opposed to hydro electricity generation in itself, but the inadequate quality of construction and restoration we encounter, all too frequently, but in particular the proposals to build such schemes in valued landscapes even where there would be little generation gain.

Developers constantly push at the boundaries of what can be deemed to be acceptable, challenging us to be vigilant in our awareness of their proposals as well as thorough in our scrutiny of their documents. We also have to predict possible outcomes and impacts, and include these in our responses.

Through Scottish Environment LINK we are members of the LINK Hilltracks subgroup. This is jointly convened by Helen Todd of Scottish Ramblers and me, and members include charities both large and small; from NTS and RSPB to the SWLG. The monitoring and assessment of hilltrack proposals and their construction, including the planning and legal processes associated with that, were onerous throughout the year despite quite a large team of volunteers being involved. A progress update is included in our latest Wild Land News. We intend to persist with this work and to re-evaluate the position after another year, when we may remount our campaign to get all tracks in the uplands brought into the full planning system.

And what of wind farms? Since late 2015 we have been listed as a non-statutory consultee, so we receive Section 36 proposals, in the form of scoping opinion requests and supplementary information for the larger schemes from developers directly. This is potentially invaluable as it gives us advance and up to date notice of proposals before they come into the public domain via press advertisements and so on. The Steering Team is a very small group of 7 busy [but enthusiastic] people, so we don't have the resources needed to scrutinise and comment on very many schemes at all, however. We have to focus our efforts towards potential impacts on wild land, and in fact, since we have been registered with the Energy Consents Unit there have been no new proposals to construct major wind farms in the SNH Wild Land Areas. There is certainly a lot happening elsewhere though even with the more restricted subsidy regime. If you are in a position to assist, even in a small way, with scrutiny of proposed developments, please contact us.

We continued to work with other charities and NGOs who are members of the LINK network. This enables us, at little cost, to participate in informed discussion and activities and to have a greater involvement in issues than we could achieve as an independent organisation. We contributed to LINK initiatives and documents on a variety of topics, including responses to Government consultations and European matters. We are frequently invited to scrutinise, comment on and "sign up" to documents, responses and so on that we would never have the time to research and comment on ourselves. An example of this was the sign up to the LINK response to the Land Use Strategy in February of this reporting period. As a small organisation this gives us a louder voice and enables us to access the range of expertise among the LINK membership and the services of the LINK parliamentary office. We also contributed by occasionally taking the lead with LINK responses and by our membership of LINK groups and subgroups. Our Treasurer, Tim Ambrose is a LINK Trustee and also their treasurer, I am a LINK Trustee and work across several of their subgroups as well as co-convening the Hilltracks subgroup, Chrissie Valluri is a member of a Group and a subgroup, and a member, Tom Leatherland, chaired the previous Freshwater Task Force and wrote the LINK responses to several Water Framework Directive consultations early in this reporting period. For a small organisation we have tried to punch above our weight!

We were pleased with the level of attendance at our 2015 AGM. This was held during a prolonged period of heavy rain and many roads were flooded. Despite this many travelled some distance to join us. Unfortunately one of our presenters, a member of the Steering Group, James Fenton, was thwarted by floods at Crianlarich on his journey from home near Oban. This was particularly unfortunate as James was to present a contrasting view from the other presenter, Helen Armstrong, who managed to arrive from Edinburgh. It has to be said that Helen gave a very interesting presentation during which she very fairly indicated where her views differed from James' and there was a very full discussion session.

An area of concern for the Group was the level of recruitment, both of members and to the Steering Group. I would ask members to consider participation on the Steering Group; our meetings are not that frequent as we correspond via email. Please contact me or any of the Steering Group members to find out more; I can assure you that you would find it worthwhile and interesting. We do urgently need assistance in various areas:- managing the website, helping the editor with various aspects of his work, increasing our use of social media and offering some input to planning matters and our consideration of and responses to development proposals. We recognise that it would be useful to produce an e-newsletter a few times a year, to keep members up to date more regularly than the magazine can achieve. Unfortunately despite several requests, we do not have a complete list of Members' email addresses, so we may have to proceed with those we have. Paper communications are far too costly, environmentally demanding and time consuming for these purposes.

Finally, I must thank the Steering Group members for their efforts and support over this reporting period. All have contributed enthusiasm and action in some way: Tim Ambrose for his diligence in keeping our accounts so accurately and thoroughly, Grant Cornwallis for keeping on top of membership matters, Chrissie Valluri for her contributions to discussions and her knowledge of land matters, Pete Ewing for contributing so knowledgeably to discussions especially on rewilding and deer matters and composing letters of objection and articles for Wild Land News for us, James Fenton for writing letters of objection and magazine articles, and contributing so much of his specialist knowledge on ecology and peat matters, and a special mention must be made of George Charles. During this year Calum Brown had to resign from his role as our editor, website and social media person, for both family and work reasons. Calum had been our long term editor and also managed our social media activity and the website. His eloquent writing and photography will be familiar to anyone who has been a reader of Wild Land News. George rose to the occasion and volunteered to edit the magazine for us, which he has done very well indeed with no previous knowledge of editorial work, we are hugely appreciative of his generosity in doing this. During the year two other Steering Group members resigned for personal reasons; Hugh Tooby who was a great enthusiast, full of great ideas, and John Milne, our previous Convenor who had been responsible for instigating the production of Wind Farms Gone Wild. John worked very hard to uphold the aims of our Group and frequently expressed his views through the letter pages of the Herald and Scotsman, he was a real voice for Wild Land. John, Calum and Hugh are missed by all of us.

Beryl Leatherland