

WILD LAND NEWS 65

Winter 2005/6



COMMENT - Future energy - choices or meltdown

Article

It's all coming together to create a nice heady brew for the coming couple of years... The sharp rise in energy prices; the floodgates opening for onshore windfarm applications (and some hydro too); the resurrection down south of nuclear power; a new planning bill proposing Holyrood rubber-stamping for national projects. All this and at the same time the Scottish Executive are saying yes they can stop a nuclear power station being built in Scotland even if Westminster require it.

It all smacks yet again of a lack of a decent, well funded, public supported strategy for energy production/supply and conservation. The national grid may be joined up by its very nature but there is little medium to long term joined-up thinking for Britain's energy.

So where does the Wild Land Group stand on nuclear power given our antipathy to most, if not all, onshore windfarms and hydro in the Highlands & Islands. Is it clean, geographically small, carbon-neutral or is it a terrorist target, with meltdown/attack likely to contaminate huge areas of land (never mind the people, flora and fauna). Does it concentrate power in the hands of the few or does it buy us vital breathing time whilst other technologies come on stream? And what about the waste - is this destined for some remote highland area with stable rock and no roll ?

It is not strange that Western countries can bring nuclear power technology up to speed very quickly and talk about new power stations, yet technology for wave and tidal seem to never quite get off the ground (or should it be 'under the water'). And energy conservation - good for the economy, for jobs, for businesses - why is this not a 'no-brainer' (using current lingo).

The majority on the Steering Team feel that at this present time there is no urgent need to jump again onto the nuclear bandwagon. The risks and costs are still too high. We should put much more effort into renewable energy technologies especially for base load/firm generation sources not dependent upon wind or sun. Biofuel, wave and tidal come to mind. Local conservation and generation are the answer too.

It goes without saying that we are not surprised that Britain fails to have a strategic approach to energy. Would we do it better if the Scottish Executive had the power to control all energy policy, rather than Westminster ? Or is that really in the hands of the multinationals and the market ?

We would welcome any comment from members on this matter.

Rewilding our forests

Article

*Forestry policy is changing for the better. **David Jarman** considers the options for restructuring the plantations and suggests where they could be removed entirely.*

part 1 - the north

If you could wave a wand and 'disappear' a thousand acres of that sitka-type afforestation we all know and love, where would your prime candidate be for rewilding ?

For years, many of us have railed in vain against the incessant spread of the conifer tide over fine moors, beneath great mountain ranges, and into remote glens. The scenic damage has been aggravated by the loss of freedom to roam. In the Lake District, most



This hillside temporarily resembles a bombsite immediately after clear-felling, but that is a price we have to pay if we are to reverse the damage to our landscape from 20th century forestry policy.
Photo: John Digney

of the mountain core has been defended against evergreen encroachment, but nowhere has seemed sacrosanct in Scotland or Wales.

As we have reported in recent WLNs, forest rewilding is actually happening all over Scotland - but primarily for nature conservation reasons, restoring ancient pine forests and oakwoods. Now there are encouraging signs that Forestry Commission Scotland is becoming more willing to recognise that in some places afforestation has extended too far into the wilds, and that there is a landscape case for pulling back the boundaries. This is unlikely to be by premature fell-to-recycle except in special cases: rather, when the crop is harvested, the clearfell areas will simply not be replanted. Left unfenced, they will revert to open land, and when residues eventually rot, open access.

Through Scottish Environment LINK, we had an opportunity recently to meet with Forest Enterprise landscape architects and begin to explore the practicalities. Sandra Hanlon (who covers south of roughly Glencoe-Dundee) and Maggie Gilvray (north) showed us examples on Arran and Raasay, where conifer production is now uneconomic because of transport costs, and forest design is already shifting to a mix of native woodland and open ground. But there are three big practical problems in achieving true rewilding :

- it is very costly to clear brash, let alone stumps, so the visual appearance of the open land will remain unnatural for decades; 'whole tree harvesting' is now beginning to happen, and ought to become the norm as biofuel energy comes on stream, but this will be least economic in remote areas.
- where forest roads have been engineered, they are unlikely to be removed, and will remain intrusive - as we saw up Glen Affric.
- sitka regeneration will be difficult to control, especially where deer numbers are reduced, and where brash gives protection from browsing (though brash also aids native regeneration).

Even so, the prospect of 'managed retreat' from forest frontiers is enormously encouraging. Where might the wild land priorities be ? I have just had a valuable session with FE in Inverness looking at their holdings in northern Scotland, and my top six candidates are :

1. Glen Nevis - it has long seemed extraordinary to me that the culmination of the West Highland Way should be a descent through dense conifer forestry, obscuring views across to a modest lump called Ben Nevis or something. I have never walked this bit, but I have come off the west end of the Mamores via this forest, which was depressing enough. Time to think a wee bit bold - I would withdraw all the commercial forestry from Glen Nevis, in favour of native woodland dotting the slopes, with plenty of open ground around the paths and along the skyline. Progress up the glen would then be a glorious experience from the edge of Fort William to Steall, rather than an abrupt switch from artificial to wild half-way.
2. Glen Shiel - this could be almost as grand as Glen Coe, if the prominent swathe of forest most of the way along the upper glen were removed. National Trust for Scotland own all the upper slopes above the forest, and there is amazing scope for integrated management, with a natural transition from native woodland on the lower ground through montane scrub to open slopes. Plenty of space should be created for unhindered access to the Three Brothers and Five Sisters. Felling has only just commenced in Glen Shiel (with mostly sitka replanting), and this is an ideal time for a radical redesign. The benefits would be enjoyed by thousands of visitors on the main road to Skye; despite the road this is still a fine wild glen as soon as you get up the hill a bit. The views from the bounding ridges - especially the South Cluanie Ridge - would be immensely improved. PS - the forestry in Strath Croe round the corner beyond Morvich should be part of this Kintail rewilding package; it defiles the way in to that magnificent defile the Bealach na Sgairne, and has to be endured by people making the pilgrimage to the Falls of Glomach.
3. Achnashellach - most of the forest here is not unattractive, Glen Carron being quite modest in scale. But the finest hill path over the Coulin hills to Torridon starts from the station, with the first mile through the forest being an ad hoc mess. It would be wonderful to pull back the forest completely out of this small side valley below Coire Lair, and allow this great walk to feel wild from beginning to end, starting up through scattered oak and birch, with no sharp fenced boundary hemming it in.
4. Inverlael - this is a similar story, with the main way into the Beinn Dearg massif starting through a mile or two of conifers. When I first did this (it was Chernobyl week), the outermost flat ground was a stand of fine Scots pine and larch. Now that has been felled, with mostly sitka succeeding. I would not be averse to the grandeur of 'big trees' here - and a bit of shelter at start and finish of a rough day. But once into the narrow entrance to Gleann na Sguaib, the forest becomes alien; and it makes an intrusive dam across the mouth looking back down from the hills.
5. Glen Hurich - Glen Scaddle. At last, a really remote one for you wild land purists, which makes it interesting to try and justify as a priority, given that only a handful of gangrels will ever get anywhere near it. But the same is true of some of the native pinewood fragments being rescued in obscure spots. Glen Hurich is that deep clutch of narrow valleys behind Ben Resipol which has long been lost to dense Austrian-type forest. It is in the Ardgour hills, which are notable for their narrow winding passes from Loch Linnhe through to Loch Shiel, the best being at the head of Glen Scaddle. By a quirk of geomorphology, the watershed is not in the pass, but a short mile further east. As therefore is the FE march. And so, diligently using their assets to the full, about 20 years ago they extended the Hurich plantings into a pocket which in effect fills the natural head of Glen Scaddle and blots out the pass. To harvest it would need the forest road bulldozed on through the defile. This is all now clearly silly, so here is one good candidate for immediate fell-to-recycle before the task - and the amount of waste - becomes excessive. I spotted this incursion from the fine wee peaks above Maclean's Towel (Corran Ferry) : with the eastern Ardgour glens all free of coniferisation, to binocular the telltale dark fungus insinuating through from the west was decidedly creepy.
6. Glen Doll - my only nominee east of the A9, up the head of Glen Clova. By complete contrast with Ardgour and its narrow passes, the essence of the landscape over here is the blind trough-head, with paths ascending out of them to cross the Mounth plateau. My first visit here, in pursuit of some undulation like Mayar, was my last,

principally because finding this magnificent collection of glacial scoops filled in with wall-to-wall forestry was just too disheartening. Forest redesign might soften the edges and free up the main paths, but for me nothing less than pulling right out of the corries back to a core of Big Trees around the road-end will do.

What strikes me about this wishlist is how modest it is. Looking at a map of FE holdings on their office wall, even the largest - Glen Shiel (my personal top priority) - is hardly visible. We are not talking here about wholesale abandonment of vast forests like Glen Garry, where redesign and more sensitive management are the way forward. We are looking at marginal adjustments within the outermost 5% of the forest estate that pushed the limits too far.



The Forestry Commission have rebuilt the path up Ben Ledi on ground that was until recently covered in dense coniferous plantation. The vegetation is now recovering well, and the open feel to the route makes it a far more enjoyable experience than the dismal trudge it used to be.

Photo: John Digney

And pragmatically this is wise, because while a glut of cheap timber on world markets has made much of our forestry uneconomic at present, this will doubtless change, especially if bioenergy takes off. Now is the time to claw back the most grievous losses, and to set the location and design parameters for any future expansion.

Over to you - what do you think of these priorities for northern Scotland, and what are your candidates for southern Scotland? Note we are not yet looking at private forests - where in the north, my prime candidate has to be Glen Pean / Glen Dessary, which must surely be uneconomic to extract anyway.

Here are the first reactions one member (Keith Miller) to get the debate started:

- **Glen Nevis** has some of the highest natural woodland in Britain and the conifer plantations are appalling. Since first walking along the glen nearly 35 years ago I've always hoped that someday I'll see the complete removal of conifers from the glen; to be replaced naturally with native woodland habitats. I can clearly remember discussing these issues with my late father back in the early 1970s.
- **Glen Shiel** is definitely an impressive glen through which a trunk road passes and would be significantly improved if the conifers were removed.
- **Glen Doll** has another appalling area of insensitive plantation. Coire Sharroch has a wonderful area of montane scrub with populations of *Salix lanata* & *S. lapponum*. When you are amongst these relict willow populations it is easy to imagine what larger parts of the Highlands could have been like with a different pattern of land ownership and subsequent management. Then you look down and see what the public purse has done with the conifer plantations below.

We invited FE to comment on a draft of this article, and their reactions on most of these 'target sites' are encouraging. For example, at Glen Doll **"The problem looking down from high ground is acknowledged. The current plan indicates significant withdrawal from the upper slopes and the top end of Glen Doll but because of the size of the trees and the cost and resources that this would involve, no substantial felling is due to take place in the western section of the glen before 2012."**



Even where entire plantations have not been removed, they have been re-shaped as here above Loch Leven. The felled area is not to be re-planted.
Photo: Maggie Gilvray

At Glen Nevis, they comment that **"there is now a real mix of species (birch, larch and spruce) within the younger areas that have been felled and replanted"** - and that liaison with the Nevis Partnership has never suggested any more ambitious rewilding - a challenge we will pursue !

Many thanks to Hugh Clayden at FCS (whom we met in course of LINK input to the Forest Strategy Review) for opening up this line of discussion, and to Hugh Insley at FE for putting his staff onto the case : their positive and imaginative responses to suggestions that would probably have been condemned as heresy a mere decade ago are refreshing. We now hope to be consulted (via LINK) on Forest Design Plans for the more sensitive areas as they come up for review.

How about a Highland Members Group?

Now that one of your Steering Team (David Jarman) is semi-resident in the Highlands, it seems like a good idea to create a local members group. This could be a simple email forum or telephone contact network for those who are able and willing to engage a bit more actively in wild land issues. It could meet informally, or hold events if there is enough interest.

David is emailing members within reach of Inverness who have provided us with an e-address - if you haven't but would like to be involved, do phone or if possible email him. All members are invited to an initial get-together on Tuesday 7th March at 7.30 at his Black Isle abode - RSVP for directions. If there is sufficient interest, we hope our coordinator, Alistair Cant, will be able to join us.

Please contact David or Alistair for details
David's e-mail address is: [david.jarman914 at virgin.net](mailto:david.jarman914@virgin.net)

A simple stroll on the wild side of Drumochter

Article

David Jarman

Taking a break from the wilds and all their woes, I was down in Huddersfield recently for my annual blast of new music (highly recommended, not least for easy escapes by bus or train into Pennine retreats ... *he's obviously a hopeless case - Ed*). Chatting in the queues, one

enthusiast remarked on how you become ever more over-sensitised to the least disturbance. Not just the inevitable coughs and sneezes, but note-scribblers, programme-droppers, Velcro-tearers (ever so slowly), distant sirens (emergency dashes for fish suppers...). An aural intrusion may only last a second or few, but the after-effect distracts for minutes. And rehearsing suitable retribution can occupy you for hours.

And so it can be in the wilds. I'm losing count of the number of foreign visitors whose enduring memory of a day in our mountains is of a low-flying jet catching them unawares, even though the actual sound is a brief one-off. The sonic scar across what to them is an unspoiled wilderness vandalises it irreparably.

In the mountains of course, most distractions from their simple enjoyment are visual not aural, although when Keith and I managed to snatch a weekday up Beinn Eibhinn, we were accompanied of all the incongruous things by the penetrating sound of a reversing bleeper on an excavator quarrying road metal several miles away beside the track into Corroul from Moy.

Some of these distractions are new - like, well, mobile phone masts - but most have been around since I began hillgoing - like, um, bulldozed tracks. I used not to be bothered by things less obvious than jets, but the more you value our shrinking wilds, the more you can't help noticing the accumulating insults, whether little or large.

So it is with simple pleasure that I recount that rarity, a day in the hills with hardly a blemish to compromise my humble enjoyment. It was not a likely location, nor did it occur to me until at least half way round that it might be so distinguished - spotting an absence is always hard. And it was a weekday, which usually guarantees a hello or two from the RAF, to offset the absence of other hillfolk.

My aim was to get onto the East Drumochter plateau for the first time, not by the usual munro-grabbing quickie, but circling Coire Mhic-sith from Dalnaspidal. This curiously unglaciated valley has a fine east ridge, with unusually distinctive tops for the Gaick - Glas Mheall Mor and Beag. No track leads up onto them, the sound of the A9 is soon left behind, no fence follows or obstructs the crest, the views across Atholl and eventually towards the Gorms are unsullied by any prominent tracks or masts or turbines. A dip is crossed, peat hags are skirted, and a reasonable line can be found (by eye from opposite, and by instinct, not by GPS - though I confess to having been aided by vertical air photos) to A' Bhuidheanach Bheag.

Hereabouts a line of fence posts intermittently indicates the estate and county march; I gave the loose ones a good thinning, as one does, while conceding that an occasional marker is a boon in mist. You can follow them to the brink of Drumochter for a view west without becoming conscious of its modern communications, although megapylons might start to out-top the intermediate berm. Heading off down the broad south shoulder, there are hints that quad vehicles might once have come this way, but if so it was long ago. Only on the lowest slopes are there regular tracks, and these have not been bulldozed, just follow lines of better ground.

We are entirely indebted to the private estate (whoever it may be) for observing traditional proprieties by walking this ground, when it would be only too easy to engineer roads well up the spurs - as the next estate east has - or to drive quads right over the tops, as we observed on the east Meagaidh range. Maybe we should instigate a discreet award scheme to foster such benign ownership. Or maybe I should have stayed blissfully unaware of this absence of trammelling, for - over-sensitised - I shall now never dare venture up there again, lest...

My other aim was to take a proper gander at Coire Mhic-sith, that innocent seat of controversy. Had you been there in pursuit of tranquillity a couple of Mays ago, you could

have encountered a score of grown men and women in heated contention as to whether the parallel rules across the opposite slope were geological strata, or the shorelines of an ice-dammed lake. Certainly there are fine overflow channels at every dip around the perimeter. And if we are over-anxious at signs of the unhandiwork of man, it is good to come upon erratics of Rannoch granite dotted about the plateau, from days when it was deep beneath the icesheet.

Bid to extend Cairngorms National Park

Article

John Swinney, the MSP for North Tayside and former SNP leader, intends to propose a Members' Bill to the Scottish Parliament to extend the boundaries of the Cairngorms National Park (CNP).

The Park's current boundaries were smaller than expected compared to those recommended in the Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) report proposing the Park. The areas left out include Eastern and Highland Perthshire including the Forest of Atholl, Blair Atholl, Beinn Udlamain, Glas Tulaichean and the Spittal of Glenshee.

The Bill would also propose that one member of the CNP Authority be appointed by Perth & Kinross Council.

The Group supports this proposal, and wishes it every success.

Alistair Cant

Archipelago Forum

Article

*John Digney reports
on a new initiative in the
Staffa archipelago*

The west coast of Mull must be one of the finest and most unspoilt parts of Scotland, with its dramatic cliffs, magnificent sea lochs and high hills (Ben More is the only island Munro outside Skye). The overall scene, however, is further enhanced by a scattering of smaller islands, and a new initiative, the Archipelago Forum has been established by some of the owners to ensure the special qualities of these islands are safeguarded for future generations.



The Isle of Staffa, with its remarkable columnar basalt formations. To the left is the Dutchman's Cap, the most southerly of the Treshnish Isles.

Photo: Chris Cant

The innermost of the islands is Eorsa, sitting at the middle of Loch na Keal. Further out and of similar size are Inch Kenneth and Little Colonsay. The largest two, Ulva and Gometra, are

effectively one island at low water, and Ulva is separated from Mull by only the narrowest of straits. Further out is Staffa, the best known of the group with its famous Fingal's Cave. Beyond it lie the Treshnish Isles, a small archipelago in themselves; their most southerly outpost is Bac Mor or the Dutchman's Cap, a distinctive shape on the horizon from all angles.

The archipelago lies within the Loch na Keal National Scenic Area, and although parts of it are already covered by a variety of conservation designations, the Forum hopes to achieve recognition of the importance of the group as a whole by seeking Unesco World Heritage Site status. That status has been enjoyed since 1986 by the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, which has the same columnar basalt formations that are so prominent on Staffa and elsewhere in the archipelago. Some of the islands are uninhabited, while the others are only sparsely populated and there are no public roads. The absence of intensive agriculture helps to ensure that the surrounding waters are among the cleanest in the world, and the rich variety of wildlife includes whales, basking sharks, otters, porpoises, dolphins, sea eagles, puffins and corncrakes among many others. All of this, plus the connection with St. Columba and his 6th century foundation on neighbouring Iona, adds up to a remarkable natural and cultural heritage.

The aims of the Forum can be summarised as follows:

- To seek Unesco World Heritage Site status
- To encourage "wild land" status
- To ensure this outstanding wild area will be enjoyed by future generations
- To support traditional fishing, agriculture and tourism in the archipelago
- To implement an area wide pro-active management plan
- To promote research and education

At this early stage the Forum is seeking reaction to its proposals from those who are likely to be interested in the initiative. If you would like simply to express support, make suggestions or ask any questions, please contact:

Roc Sandford, Gometra Farm, Isle of Gometra, Ulva Ferry, Isle of Mull, Argyll PA73 6NA. Tel: 07740431632. E-mail: [roc at gometra.org](mailto:roc@gometra.org)

COMMENT - Future energy - choices or meltdown

Article

Our politicians are failing to recognise the value of our landscapes in the drive towards energy generation. David Jarman reports.

A Member in Beaulieu has alerted us to a consultation by The Highland Council on this strategy, to which we have to respond by 13 January. She tells us that a Working Party involving HIE, SNH, VisitScotland etc has been meeting all year. In April she attended a forum of groups (mostly local and anti-windfarm) as a local Ramblers Group rep - and was the only delegate to raise 'wild land' issues all afternoon. In November, she went to one of the half-dozen public meetings advertised in local papers, in Inverness, to find only 30 people there that evening.

What our diligent member is stressing is first, that a consultation on a matter of the widest interest is effectively confined to local people (because national bodies are either not invited or find it hard to attend at distant venues), and second, that Highland Council will have the impression that hardly anyone is bothered by the landscape impact of renewable developments.

Indeed Highland's leaflet is heavily biased in favour of renewables, with a diagram of scales in which the pros decisively outweigh the cons :

PROS (in green)

Reduced CO2 emissions
Reduced wider energy pollution
Dispersed energy source
Secure energy source
New economic activity
Opportunities for local ownership

CONS (in red)

Localised disturbance to wildlife
Localised neighbour interactions
Changes to landscape
New infrastructure needs

Likewise, in their 'vision for renewables' nine plus-factors are set out, including retention of associated wealth by local communities. They do give one space to "retention of the regional diversity, scenic qualities, and local distinctiveness of landscape".

Clearly, the big issue is onshore wind, which they expect to meet 3200 MW of the 2020 target of 6700 MW - almost half. A map of development zones appears at first glance to 'save' the vast majority of the Highlands with a 'presumption against development'. Preferred development areas are

- the Monadhliath
- around Glenmoriston
- around Ben Wyvis
- SE Sutherland
- NE Sutherland
- Caithness hills

These beads are on the string of the existing national grid line from Dounreay-Beaully-Drumochter-Denny. If several big windfarms go ahead in each of these areas, there will hardly be a group of Munros on or east of the main watershed from which mega-industrial intrusions into the landscape will not be visible on a clear day.

But beyond these 'preferred areas' (where we are to have no chance of resisting anything) there are swathes of 'possible areas' which the fine print says are almost as good except they are further from the existing grid, or ought to be more diffuse in grouping (yes, let's spread the pain widely). Possible areas are thickly scattered around Ben Alder, Creag Meagaidh, Loch lochy, Appin, Morvern, Ardnamurchan, Loch Eil, Glenelg (yes, that hideous powerline to Skye), SE Skye, NW Skye, Applecross, and NW Sutherland coast from Kylesku to Kinlochbervie. And there are fingers in from the east coast up Conon, Oyckell, and Shin.

The 'presumption against' is really just the areas where it would be too costly to develop - pretty much anywhere the industry wants it is an open door.

How can one possibly respond ? How about:

**THIS IS THE BIGGEST THREAT TO THE WILDNESS OF THE HIGHLANDS BY
CIVILISED SOCIETY, EVER**

Yes, even bigger than the hydro schemes for which we sacrificed nearly every major river catchment and many a fine glen, and which will never be rewilded. And :

WE HAVE NO CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT AT UK, SCOTTISH OR LOCAL LEVELS TO RECOGNISE THIS PRICELESS AND IRREPLACEABLE ASSET, LET ALONE GIVE IT ANY EFFECTIVE PROTECTION

We entirely support efforts to minimise fossil fuel burning, but

- reducing energy consumption is by far the best way forward
- electricity generation must be near main centres of demand, to minimise transmission losses and pylon blight
- Scotland should not sacrifice its world-class scenery just so England can enjoy its local landscapes
- within Scotland, priority should be to biomass, offshore wind (east coast), marine hydro (east and north coast), local and micro wind and solar, and onshore wind in and around the Central Belt - in that order, with new grid capacity installed as far as possible undersea and linking to east coast grid connections.

Sadly, it will only be once much almost irreparable damage has been done to the wild terrain (with access roads and deep foundations, shifting peat and blasting rock) and to wild and distant views that people will shake their heads and say that was a foolish short-sighted thing to have done, for the sake of a few jobs and handouts, and for a quick fix that upsets as few voters as possible.

Wild land group uses email network for the first time

The Steering Team authorised the use of the email addresses sent in by members to circulate details of the powerline upgrade between Beaulay and Denny. This proposal by Scottish & Southern Energy is opposed by the Steering Team, and we encouraged members to send any comments of their own to the Scottish Executive by the deadline. The email system allowed our information to be sent out quickly and efforts were made to keep the content short, to avoid clogging up people's in-trays.

If you wish to add your email to the distribution list for future mail-outs, then please let the Co ordinator know. We never pass on email addresses to third parties for commercial/marketing purposes, etc.

The Steering Team considered this matter to be so important that we also authorised the sum of £500 from Group funds to be contributed to a joint publicity campaign with many other outdoor/conservation bodies.

Alistair Cant