

## **Scottish Wild Land Group**

### **Convenor's Report for the year 2019 to 2020**

This was again a very busy year, and the members of the Steering Group [SG] were kept fully occupied. Even so, it was impossible to keep on top of all we feel we need to address. Nevertheless, we managed to maintain SWLG as a thriving charity, as follows:

Tim Ambrose continued to meticulously maintain our accounts, as he had done for many years, and ensured compliance with the requirements of our charity regulator, OSCR. This is a core task for any organisation, and we are extremely grateful for Tim's long commitment. We are fortunate that we have no major overheads and have volunteers on the Steering Group contributing their time and personal IT resources.

I reported a decline in membership numbers last year, and this has continued, despite Grant Cornwallis, the Membership Secretary, doing his utmost to pursue lapsed subscriptions. Tim and Grant came to the view that the number of members who do not subscribe annually via electronic means and Bankers Orders contributed to this decline. Unfortunately this wasn't adequately balanced by recruitment of new members. The lapsed members were contacted on an individual basis, as we do every year, and they almost always renewed their membership, but this is at the cost of additional expense and substantial time – time that could be spent on more productive work! We urge members to make their annual subscriptions by Bankers Orders, which Tim prefers and which are easier to keep track of.

The website is our main means of being able to keep members up to date with current matters, campaigns, petitions, and when we have needed to encourage members to take action such as writing to their MSP. In this digital age, matters can progress very swiftly and this is the best way to keep informed and get involved in supporting our efforts. Peter Willimott continued to efficiently post material for us and manage the site. I would encourage members to try to set aside just a short time each week to look at the site and see what is new and how you could help our work; you never know, your support for a petition or sending a timely brief email to a MSP could make all the difference!

During the year we produced two editions of Wild Land News, thanks to the diligent efforts of James Fenton, the editor. It was to James' credit that he managed to produce such interesting copy, despite the difficulties of sourcing articles, as some of the potential contributors who James had contacted were becoming increasingly busy, and James and I had to resort to writing articles ourselves as deadlines approached. In addition, Andrew Painting of the SG has a real talent for writing and you may have enjoyed his material in several editions. As well as distributing the magazine to members Grant continued to deliver them enthusiastically and in person to many outlets throughout the Highlands and rural parts of Scotland, and I posted copies to specific MSPs [when there had been an article that might have interested them], the policy teams and individuals in other charities and NGOs, and to statutory bodies such as Nature Scotland [formerly SNH].

Our AGM in December 2019 was held in the Quaker Meeting Rooms in central Edinburgh, in the hope of attracting local members. It was attended by 20 members and 4 guests. After the formal

business of the AGM we were well entertained by Norman McNab who accompanied his presentation with a dazzling sequence of beautiful landscape slides.

We had hoped to hold a site visit to Glen Etive to see the sites of the 7 new run of the river hydro schemes planned for there. Another SG member, Jane Meek, had suggested this. Jane had been extensively involved in objections to these schemes and had worked with others concerned about the impacts this could have on the designated landscapes in the glen. Unfortunately we had to call this visit off due to really poor weather on the chosen weekend. I hope that SWLG will continue to hold these away days and that more of the membership choose to join the SG in what is always a worthwhile and interesting trip – although be prepared to see examples of poor construction and environmental damage.

In addition to acting on matters related to the functioning of the charity, the charitable aims and objectives of SWLG have not been neglected, and the profile of SWLG has been raised with local and national authorities as described below. In my previous report, however, I indicated that the number of development proposals that had the potential to impact on areas of landscape value continued to increase, and this has not abated. The SG has only limited capacity to respond to these, some of which take some time to scrutinise and make detailed and informed comments on, so we have had to be selective in those that were responded to. We only responded to those we considered serious enough to merit putting resources into, so this meant that the majority of proposals for new wind farms and hydro scheme were not commented on.

It is anticipated that over the next few years applications for wind farms in particular will increase. The early developments are coming to the end of their more effective generation capacity, so applications are already being made for these to be subject to repowering developments. This involves installing alternative taller turbines, around 200 metres high to blade tip. Existing concrete bases are not adequate for these so new bases and other infrastructure are required, plus statutory aviation lighting. Unfortunately the Scottish Government decided that the original EIAs and environmental statements are still relevant and can be used to support new applications. It would be preferable for these to be fully revised in line with the new baselines that now exist. Inevitably, when developers apply to upgrade their existing installations they will want to install additional turbines and extend the footprint of the wind farms that already exist. This has caused concern over increased cumulative effects in several areas, such as Dumfries and Galloway, the “ring of steel” in the vicinity of Lairg, and South Lanarkshire, to name but a few.

As a small team we are aware that we were not able to have a good overview of all of this and it would be much appreciated if any members who have some knowledge and experience of the planning system would offer us their support and expertise. We know there are members who have these skills as when I have written about planning matters in editions of Wild Land News I often receive supportive emails from members who work in the field.

The Hilltracks campaign continued to be main focus of our efforts, as it had for the previous 7 years. Work continued throughout the year, with a few Prior Notification proposals being scrutinised most weeks. Many of these were in lowland areas for agricultural purposes or for forestry tracks, for extraction and new planting, but many were for new upland tracks. Of these it was frequently evident that the main purpose was for hunting [shooting and stalking] rather than claimed agricultural purposes, and points have had to be made to the local authority to draw attention to

this, plus other deficiencies in applications. It was noted that increasingly applicants were addressing the weaknesses in their applications that we tend to look for and it became gratifying to find that our work was exerting influence in this way. I co-convene the campaign with Helen Todd of Ramblers Scotland and we had several interesting meetings throughout the year to try to progress achieving our objectives.

One of these was with the Cairngorm National Park Authority when we suggested they have a strategy to address the increasing problem of eroded tracks being made by ATVs. These damage the terrain so much that estates consequently apply for new tracks along the routes that have been over-used, claiming that this will prevent further damage [of course, it will not as then the tracks merely get extended as it becomes easier for ATVs to be used to penetrate further into the landscape]. To reduce this we suggested that the national park could consider developing guidance to encourage more sensitive ATV use, and maybe set up a pilot study which could be used as an exemplar for best practice across Scotland. The park, via one of their committees, has been working on this and we await the outcome.

We were grateful for the persistence of our monitors and other members of the public who alerted us to new track proposals and indeed the construction of unauthorised tracks. One of the latter was in Glen Clova which has been reported on in Wild Land News. After a great deal of work on the part of the National Park when we had alerted them and sent evidence, the estate was required to apply retrospectively for planning permission; this did not materialise so the park required full reinstatement, to be completed by October 2020, and we will need to monitor delivery of this restoration. In addition site visits were made to some tracks; these often caused further concerns due to the number of crow traps, tunnel traps, stoat traps and arbitrary gritting stations alongside them. I commented to local authorities on several tracks over the course of the year; and there have been some successes with planning authorities requiring improvements to proposals and in a few cases applications being withdrawn. I objected to one case that had been a full planning application, and this eventually proceeded to a Reporter led Hearing. The Reporter used our comments in their judgement and found in our favour and that of the local planning department, and the track was refused permission. SWLG comments on development proposals have been posted on the website.

The LINK Hilltracks Group continued to pursue our aim to have Hilltracks brought into the full planning system. Members may recall that the Scottish Planning Minister, despite pressure from our cross party MSP allies, failed to do this, but as a result of our persistent campaign activity which was amplified by social media activity generously run by Ramblers Scotland, compensated us by setting up a phased review of General Permitted Development, and Hilltracks were given priority in Phase 1 of the consultation. Be assured that Helen and I, with the support of the other members of the LINK Group, will be contributing a full and evidenced response, hopefully it will be sufficiently persuasive! We have a small number of Scotland-wide volunteers who continued to send me their findings from their weekly scrutiny of allocated planning portals. I collate these and also evaluate the proposed developments that they find.

SWLG has been an active member of the Scottish Environment LINK network of charities and NGOs for many years. Two of the SG, Tim and I, continued to be trustees on the LINK Board. Tim is the Treasurer and has been ably supported by the LINK Financial Officer in this demanding role. I

represented SWLG in participating in several LINK groups including Hilltracks as co-convenor, depute convenor of the Landscape group, the Planning, Wild Life Crime, Land, and Freshwater Groups and am a corresponding member of the Woodland, Wildlife, Economics and Governance Groups. This required a lot of effort, not to mention commuting, but as a small organisation we benefitted from being part of the network, sharing workloads, pushing the landscape agenda whenever opportunities arose, contributing to government consultation responses, participating in campaigns and vastly increasing our profile, especially with decision makers and civil servants. We also had access to useful events, informative workshops, and parliamentary events.

The Scottish Landscape Alliance was launched in April 2019 as mentioned in my previous report, and we have continued to be active on both the Executive Committee and one of the Working Groups. Follow up events were planned for October 2020, one for members and one had been arranged as a major event in the Scottish Parliament. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the latter has been postponed and instead in October 2020 there was an online event to update members and a wide range of other organisations on our publications and progress.

The Scottish Government at last, at the end of 2020, some months after its completion, made public the Werritty Report on various issues around the grouse industry, together with the group's recommendations. Urgent action was assured by both the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary but this did not materialise. Similarly the much delayed Independent Deer Group Report on deer management was released, with again, no follow up being initiated. LINK members were and are continuing to lobby for action on both of these.

One significant successful campaign was delivered on by the LINK Wildlife Crime Group. Gordon Dewar, the first First Minister of Scotland, said that "Wildlife Crime in Scotland is a blot on the country's reputation". Yet, many years after his death this has been allowed to continue without any effective government action. SWLG includes campaigning on species protection issues in our objectives. The Animals and Wildlife [Penalties, Protections and Powers] [Scotland] Bill 2019 was laid and the group contributed actively via giving evidence to committees, making a full response to the consultation with many LINK member organisations signed up in support, and advocacy strategies. The Group were fortunate in gaining a vast amount of help and advice from the LINK parliamentary advocacy team, and LINK also funded an evening cross party event in Holyrood as part of our advocacy, where there were presentation and many MSPs participated from all parties. The Bill became an Act of Parliament in March 2020, and work has continued on ensuring appropriate enactment. In the meantime, wildlife crime of all types has continued, including many shocking cases of raptor persecution.

Finally, during the year, the members of the SG have continued to give great support to the charity and for such a small group I think a lot was achieved across many issues that impact on wild land and our associated interests. Our efforts are never going to be enough, however, and again I would urge all members to consider in what ways they could assist in our endeavours. We were grateful for the support that members gave in subscribing and generously donating to the charity and I personally appreciated and enjoyed the many communications some sent me during the course of the year.

Beryl Leatherland [November 2020]