

WILD LAND NEWS 57

Spring 2003



COMMENT

Article

Another twist in the old development versus conservation arguments.

At a wild land seminar in Pitlochry organised by Scottish Environment LINK, it became clear that one element of Government, (namely those promoting renewable energy and energy conservation at the Scottish Executive) was lobbying hard to play down the efforts of another element of Government - Scottish Natural Heritage - who wish to protect certain landscapes and habitats from intrusive energy projects.

To the assembled mass of campaigners present, this represented another twist in the oft-repeated 'antagonism' between development and conservation. In the past, life was simpler: the 'bad guys' for wild land were bodies such as private developers, large estate owners and commercial tourist operators. Nowadays is central government, both in Holyrood and Westminster, the bad guy, for pushing the development of many wild parts of Scotland, through renewable energy schemes, typically hydro and wind farms? Or are conservation bodies the baddies - for delaying the expansion of green energy projects that will generate locally based energy for communities?

Yet again one hand of government does not work with what the other hand is charged to do. Yet again conservation bodies have to fight against schemes which in themselves are not 'bad', they are just in the wrong location and based on the 'cheapest is best' philosophy.

How long will it take for Government to realise that the substantial expansion of alternative energy projects will only succeed with widespread support if such projects are directed to locations which are relatively uncontroversial. Such locations may not be the windiest or the best spot for a hydro dam, but surely some of the massive subsidies for such projects can be used to help them be located in places collectively agreed as more suitable.

The renewable energy industry have repeated time and again that they wish certainty and clarity in locating and planning these projects. The conservation bodies have repeated that they are not against green energy. The public are already contributing through their everyday fuel bills to funds for these types of projects.

SNH have been fighting a key corner in drafting and publicising locational guidelines for wind farms, as well as advice for other renewable projects. The SNH seminars promoting such guidelines are heavily oversubscribed. What is missing is strong government backing for this approach, and clear direction to ensure projects are not in areas of wild land, special habitats, scenic areas, etc.

The International Year of the Mountain, the foot and mouth epidemic, the key tourist market all have shown that Scotland's landscapes and associated communities are of vital importance to Scotland. Can the devolved Scottish government not take a lead by protecting these assets whilst promoting renewable energy in suitable locations?

Fiona Anderson examines how we protect our wild heritage while meeting demand for cleaner energy generation.

Most readers of Wild Land News will have read in the press of the 100 or so wind farms proposed or committed in Scotland, which confirms their awareness of the increasingly visible number of wind turbines springing up in the parts of rural Scotland they visit.

Members of SWLG attending Scottish Environment LINK's seminar on Renewable Energy (RE) in November learned that there are currently 35 approved windfarms in Scotland and over 200 applications pending in the approvals pipeline, with a number of companies in competition to offer attractive terms for suitable sites to farmers and estate owners. This is due to the targets announced by the Scottish Executive last August to double the UK target for renewable energy (RE) in Scotland as a proportion of electricity consumption from 10% to 20% by 2010 and from 20% to 40% by 2020. (In 2002 it was 13% of which 12% came from hydro-electricity.) The 40% target includes some export of power to England.

Most of this boom in RE will come from wind power, which as yet is the most economic technology, apart from run-of-the-river hydro schemes. These do not need dams and reservoirs but their output is relatively small and limited in location. Wind farm location is "footloose" but can be much more damaging to wild land values. The other forms of RE, detailed more fully in the next article of Wild land News, have other limitations. Offshore wind power, for example, involves greater construction costs than onshore and needs shallow water, while wave power schemes are only at the pilot stage.

Pressure to exploit Scotland's capacity

Scotland has the greatest potential for RE of any country in Europe, having 25% of the wind resource, and it is even considered to have the best climate in the EU for solar heating of buildings as it can make better use of the sun for longer in the day and the year, while the Pentland Firth is the Saudi Arabia of the wave industry. It is evident that Scotland has the potential to be a leader in meeting energy needs from the resources around us, while contributing to UK climate change commitments in the Kyoto Treaty -the driver behind the Government's RE policies - and providing much needed cash and some employment in the Highlands and the Borders. But at what cost to wild land?

It is interesting to read in the professional planning press for 31 January that Wales has been casting the green eye at Scotland. The National Assembly in Cardiff has recently voted to double the UK target for RE by 2010, which "does not mean, as claimed, covering every hill in Wales with turbines." The Assembly intends to meet the target through equal amounts from onshore, offshore and other renewable sources. The Countryside Commission for Wales has defined optimum locations for wind farms, out of sight of any national park, remote from housing and not affecting important nature and wildlife sites.

SNH has a much bigger job to do in Scotland, which it has started with publication on the web in July 2002 of Strategic Locational Guidance for Onshore Wind Farms. Given the need to "address climate change" (which means the national energy policy to limit use of hydro-carbon fuels), SNH supports RE, subject to giving higher priority to energy efficiency and demand reduction, and supporting development with care for the natural heritage. This involves accepting that some landscape change will occur, but that wild land values should be safeguarded, there should be benefits for local communities, and existing infrastructure should be used where possible.

SNH's strategic approach is to steer wind farms to areas most suited for them by using a sieve map approach based on maps of natural heritage areas, landscape and recreation interests, including "search areas for Wild Land" in the map of non designated areas. The search areas were first published in SNH's report Wildness in Scotland's Countryside for the Year of the Mountain conference in November.

Relative levels of constraint and opportunity for wind farm construction result in 3 zones of the lowest, medium and high sensitivity to development. SNH recommend to local authorities that the best approach is to have landscape capacity studies, criteria-based development plan policies and a locational strategy like theirs working in combination. SNH's work is a welcome start to an energy strategy for Scotland, but much more remains to be done by other Scottish Executive Departments and agencies to consider all feasible ways in which Scotland can meet its responsibilities in relation to climate change.

Impact on tourism

There have been quite strong differences of view between agencies in Scotland as well as Wales about the effects that wind farms can have on visitors' reactions, as tourism is important to the economy of both countries. There have been campaigns against wind farms in North Wales and the Cambrian Mountains.

A research study commissioned by the Scottish Executive in 2000 found that concerns of local residents reduce considerably once a development is in place. This finding is similar to a Mori poll published in November last year of visitors to Argyll commissioned by the British Wind Energy Association which found that 9 out of 10 tourists say the presence of wind farms makes no difference to whether or not they would return to an area. But a survey by VisitScotland found that more than three quarters of visitors to areas where wind farms have been built or proposed say they chose to holiday in Scotland specifically for its scenery, and 28% would be put off by the presence of wind farms. Scottish Environment LINK recommends knocking their heads together - the Executive should carry out a perception study and VisitScotland should consider climate change etc.

Need for UK energy strategy

There has been a surprising lack of emphasis to date about the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not only through RE, but also through cutting personal consumption and greater efficiency of domestic and industrial systems, particularly transport. Fragmentation of government responsibilities is partly to blame. Less than 20% of the energy we use is electricity, but the targets only apply to electricity. Significantly the February 2002 UK Energy Review by the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit recommended bringing together responsibility for energy policy, climate change and transport policy under one government department. It also indicated real potential for the UK to move to a low carbon energy system through a combination of energy efficiency, RE and combined heat and power. An Energy White Paper for England & Wales, published at the end of February, adopts the same target for 2010 as Scotland, and aims to achieve a 60% cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050. RE is devolved to Scotland but the rest of national energy policy remains with the Department of Trade and Industry.

In January we heard that Whitehall is getting its energy act together but the emphasis is still on RE, with the launch of a £10m scheme in England & Wales to help home owners, schools, and communities to install their own RE systems, which may be wind turbines, hydro, energy crops or solar. A photovoltaics (solar electricity) demonstration programme also under way should eventually cover some 3000 homes and 140 non-domestic buildings. Such schemes are a drop in the ocean of course. The trick will be to get enough subsidized units in place to start to bring prices down. Active promotion is required with the public, business and industry.

A LINK Working Group has found that electricity generation accounts for 40% of greenhouse gas emissions; 20% comes from agricultural activity and the rest is due to burning of hydro-carbon fuels for transport and heating. A start has been made with recycling targets, the Climate Change levy and Government attempts to curb car use, but it is very difficult politically for any government to try to change personal behaviour. Energy is too cheap to encourage mass take up of RE at present.

But regardless of the outcome of the Iraq crisis, world oil production is expected to start to decline in the next decade while demand continues to rise, so fossil fuel saving would be urgent even without the greenhouse gas/ climate change issue. Pumped storage hydro schemes (one feasible option for future RE) the size of Loch Lomond or Loch Maree date from the 1950s and 60s.

What are we prepared to accept today as a consequence of climate change? Nuclear energy is a "green" option in Whitehall. The Energy White Paper has not ruled out the possibility that some nuclear capacity may be necessary in the longer term if RE does not meet its targets. Is replacement of Hunterston and Torness power stations after 2011 by further nuclear ones producing waste which will remain lethal for thousands of years preferable to carefully sited wind farms on the Scottish hills?

Renewable Energy Schemes in Scotland

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There are alternatives to hilltop windfarms. Fiona Anderson looks at the options currently available.

The good news is not only that other RE technologies are coming along steadily to reduce the emphasis on onshore wind in future, but also that Scottish wind farms are coming downhill. The Renewables Obligation prior to Scottish devolution had high price requirements for electricity, which required the windiest sites on top of the highest, remotest hills. Now the criteria are more flexible, with a responsible company like Scottish Power looking for sites like medium-altitude moorland, upland afforested areas, coastal locations and well exposed industrialised ground, if they can be as efficient as hilltops. Moreover, wind turbines are getting larger so fewer are required for the same output. The average height is 30-70 metres and the maximum is now 110-150m.

The type of potential impact that can be caused to wild land when sites are not brought "downhill" is shown by the application made in September by National Wind Power, at Farr in the Monadhliath hills, south west of Inverness. 45 turbines are proposed with a height of 102m to blade tips and capacity of 112.5 MW, more than double the normal size of output per turbine (1MW), and 18 kms of new access tracks are to be bulldozed in blanket peat. 7.5 kms of new track through a forest will be required and 8kms of existing tracks widened to 6 metres.

Environmental Impact Assessment is highly likely to be required even if no designated sites are involved. But the UK Energy Minister has complained recently that 2/3 of projects don't actually happen, owing to planning objections. The case has just completed the objection period before determination by the Scottish Executive (mandatory over 50 MW capacity.) Highland Council is a consultee. An application has also been made for another windfarm 10 kms away.

Another cumulative impact situation occurred in 2001 affecting a large section of the Lammermuirs south of Edinburgh, which has been claimed to be one of the last wild places in southern Scotland. In addition to the Dun Law project, (21 turbines generating electricity either side of the A68 trunk road on Soutra), a proposal at Crystal Rig in the Longformacus area involved 28 turbines capable of generating 49 MW, sufficient to power more than 60%

of households in the Borders. This scheme was only 8 miles from a third proposal at Black Hill. All three would be seen from many parts of the Southern Upland Way.

Only 15 months later in November last a 24-turbine farm was opened at Bowbeat Hill near Peebles by the Energy Minister, capable of generating electricity for half the homes in the Borders.

Less sensitive locations

By contrast, Scottish Power has applied for two windfarms in the Central Belt at Black Law, 67 turbines on an abandoned opencast mine, grazed farmland and commercial forestry and at Whitelee, 140 turbines (240 MW) on Eaglesham Moor on water board and Forest Enterprise land south of Glasgow, which would make it the UK's largest onshore windfarm. At both sites the company is working with landowners, on a Habitat Management Plan at Blacklaw which will restore broadleaved woodland and wetlands etc, while at Whitelee the forest is being restructured to provide more wildlife habitats and open up a network of footpaths, cycleways and bridleways. A visitor centre is proposed at each site.

Examples of windfarm applications on vacant urban land (brownfield sites) include Clydeport and Scottish Power's 30-turbine 30-50 MW proposal at Hunterston next to the coal terminal; a scheme by Castlemilk Economic Development Agency for 9 turbines on land owned by Glasgow City Council; and a 50-turbine proposal near Bettyhill, Sutherland using an old municipal landfill dump and a redundant national grid link. The proceeds from the latter would be shared between 66 crofters, although it is likely to be rejected as out of scale. The small Castlemilk scheme also would connect into the National Grid and is more likely to find favour as it will provide a £750,000 a year dividend to Castlemilk housing estate to support community projects and provide cheap electricity.

Problems with National Grid capacity have been threatening to stop further windfarm projects beyond those already constructed in North West Scotland, the Northern and Western Isles. This is despite up to 7 projects on Orkney justifying a new sub-sea power cable. (Four of these would be about the same size as the proposal at Hunterston). Parliamentary questions have also been tabled on providing a link with Shetland. The existing infrastructure network, designed for a small rural population, is limiting achievement of the Renewables Obligation. Now the main power line from Beaulay to Denny at least is to be upgraded from 32,000 volts (a capacity of 500 MW) to 275,000 volts on new pylons. There were around 60 planning applications for windfarms in the Highlands in September 2002 which would generate 1400MW of power.

Offshore and tidal schemes

Offshore windfarms have important potential because the wind resource is stronger and steadier in winter, and the noise problem is less, but they are more expensive to build and they require relatively shallow water. Consequently estuaries are favoured. It was estimated in November that offshore wind developments will be the largest RE sector in future, with the UK expected to install 21% of global capacity by 2007. 96 projects were under consideration in 2002. MOD objected to 5 out of 18 applications up to March last year, on grounds of interfering with radar and military low-flying.

Scotland's first offshore wind application was lodged in April 2002 for 60 turbines at Robin Rigg in the Solway Firth. Six months later Dumfries & Galloway Council, Dalbeattie Community Council and SNH decided to oppose it in view of the landscape and visual impacts on two NSAs and the Solway Coast Regional Scenic Area. A public inquiry is likely even without any objections from the English side.

Offshore developments are not subject to normal planning controls, but require at least 4 different applications to Crown Estates, DAFS, SEA etc. Britain's first offshore consent off the Northumberland coast at Blyth required 9, including a planning application for an electricity substation on land. A feasibility study was under way last summer for one of the largest offshore wind installations in the world - 120 turbines generating 500 MW on towers 400 ft above the sea at the 3 oil platforms of Beatrice oilfield in the inner Moray Firth. It is claimed they would barely be visible from the shore.

The world's first tidal energy device, the Stingray machine, is to be positioned on the seabed in the Sound of Yell, Shetland, this summer as a test unit. A commercial energy farm is intended to follow, possibly off the east coast, with many more operational by 2010. A wave energy test centre is also proposed near Stromness. A prototype wave power device, Wavegen's Shoreline Limpet, which has been feeding up to 500 kw per hour to the National Grid from Portnahaven on Islay is now replicated by 3 machines in shallow waters off the west coast of Lewis. There are plans to install it elsewhere, including in breakwaters.

Hydro power

Finally, hydro power is the most tried and tested technology of all and the cheapest, producing 15% of the world's electricity, but mostly dating from the 1950s and 60s. It is a flexible source, not in location, but to supplement urban power generation at certain times. However large-scale hydro schemes are damaging environmentally. One of the most controversial small-scale schemes in recent years involves four lochs in the Shieldaig area of Wester Ross. As readers of WLN know, Highland Light & Power withdrew their proposal for a previous scheme in the same area before the result of a Public Inquiry in 1997. The scheme they now propose would generate only 3.55MW.

Scottish and Southern Energy have been re-examining a number of schemes explored but not developed in the 1950s and 60s under the stimulus of the ROS and the Executive's enthusiasm for "green" energy. They are now proposing a scheme for Glendoe in the Monadhliaths which would flood upper Glen Tarff and the A'Chraidhleag wilderness. Small scale "run-of-the-river" schemes for local communities are more likely to succeed, such as the 3MW Cuileig power station near Ullapool, which diverts water from the river into turbines via an underground pipe, and then feeds it back inconspicuously. The power station itself is also buried.

These are the RE technologies which are most likely to affect the environment and wild land. Energy from biomass wastes, energy crops and forestry residues is debatably RE in that they are grown rather than harvested and the development involved is normal built development. Solar generation of electricity (photovoltaics) and heating of water and buildings are likely to grow significantly in future.

A Wind Farm to Farr

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The Wild Land Group has been keeping a watching brief on the ever-growing number of applications for wind farms in various locations in Scotland. It can be difficult to comment on individual applications because of the shortage of time, resources, and the problem of getting detailed information on the application. The Group has tended to concentrate its efforts on lobbying at the national level to try to ensure that intrusive renewable energy projects (of whatever generating source) do not encroach significantly on land with high wildness qualities.

An application for a wind farm at Farr, near Tomatin, Inverness-shire by National Wind Power was one that the Group did study in more depth and we sent comments into Highland Council. As the scheme is over 50 megawatts in capacity, the application is decided by the

Scottish Executive. The local Council is asked to take a view on the application, and usually treats it like a normal planning application. Instead of giving a decision, it gives its views e.g. 'minded to approve/refuse' to the Executive.

One of the interesting causes for concern to several of the objectors to the Farr wind farm is the proposed loss of a large area of carbon store, i.e. the peat bog - both from the turbine and base construction but also the long, wide access road. In view of climate change and carbon credits, the erosion of some peat bog is seen by some as a loss of significant carbon store capabilities, and thus an adverse cost to society. Recently carbon credits are having a cost attached to them (and traded), so why could Scotland's peat bog resource not be costed and included in the equation for any development proposal?

The Group expressed its comments to Highland Council - mainly on the landscape/visual impact of this large scheme, together with the impact of the access road and ancillary buildings that would be constructed. Lobbying by those concerned by the scheme, including the Group, did bring about a revision at the last minute from the developers, with a removal of 5 prominent turbines from the application.

At the end of February, the Council's Planning Committee inspected the site and met to decide that they were 'minded to approve' this scheme. The ball is now in the hands of the Scottish Executive.

A scheme such as this further convinces the Group of the need to positively direct wind farms to less sensitive locations, and for local authorities to identify areas of wild land that should not be burdened by such intrusions.

Alistair Cant

Footnote: the SWLG annual members' meeting is to be held in Fort Augustus in May 2003 and a visit to the Farr area is being planned.

Everyone Campaign

Article

Scotland's environmental groups campaigning together

The 'everyone' campaign is an initiative from Scottish Environment LINK to push the environment up the political agenda in the run up to the Scottish Parliamentary elections. LINK represents some 25 organisations (including SWLG) with nearly half a million supporters and is calling on all political parties and candidate MSPs to outline their commitment to the environment.

A System 3 poll for the 'everyone' campaign found that

- 86% of people think the environment is an important political issue
- 51% say environmental issues are likely to affect how they vote
- 25% rated the performance of the Scottish Parliament on environmental issues in its first four years as good.

The campaign highlights the value of the environment to the economy, the health of the nation and the quality of our lives - as well as the value to wildlife and wild places.

Six challenges to politicians have been set out:

1. **Clean Air**
Reduce road traffic levels 10% by 2010. Tackle air pollution and climate change by redirecting at least two thirds of the £900 million planned for road building to public transport, walking and cycling.
2. **Less Landfill**
Reduce waste by providing doorstep recycling for every household and introduce a plastic bag charge. Set a 1% per year reduction target for total waste produced by 2010.
3. **Healthy Seas**
Appoint a minister for the Seas, overhaul Scotland's outdated legislation in order to manage our seas and coasts better and introduce 'regeneration areas' to restore fish stocks and wildlife.
4. **Safe Food**
Treble investment in environmentally friendly agriculture, pay organic farmers beyond the current five year support limit and introduce a new payment scheme for conversion to organic fruit and vegetables.
5. **Protection for Wildlife and Wild Places**
Stronger protection and increased funding to care properly for Scotland's precious wildlife and wild places. Allocate more resources for the police to deal with wildlife criminals. Commit more resources to encourage enjoyment of the countryside, including a Scotland-wide path network.
6. **Reduction in Climate Changing Gases**
Tackle climate change by improving domestic energy efficiency by 20% by 2010 and a further 20% by 2020. Introduce energy auditing for all homes.

These six challenges have been set out as straightforward steps that could make a real difference to everyone's lives. 'Everyone' is encouraging voters to make their vote count for the environment by questioning candidates about their policies.

So SWLG members - get campaigning!

For more information about 'everyone' check out the campaign website www.everyonecan.org or send an SAE to Scottish Environment LINK, 2 Grosvenor House, Shore Road, Perth PH2 8BD

Implementing the Access Legislation

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The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has been passed by the Scottish Parliament but it is not likely to be until Spring 2004 that its access provisions will come into effect. The main reason for the delay is that the Scottish Outdoor Access Code needs to be finalised, consulted on and approved.

The code is guidance which will put flesh on the bones of the legislation. A draft has been worked on for some time, but until the legislation was passed the final version for public consultation could not be completed. The consultative draft of the code was published in late March and a 12-week consultation period now commences. The feedback then needs to be assessed by SNH and the revised code submitted to the Scottish Executive, who after due consideration will submit it to the Parliament for approval.

The code will be quite crucial in providing good advice and setting the right tone for resolving issues of access in the countryside. The draft already seems to have ignored some assertions from Ross Finnie, the Minister in charge of the legislation. For example he promised that one could walk along the tramlines in fields of crops, i.e. between rows of potatoes or other crops with distinct spacing layouts. That is not in the code and no doubt will be one of several hotly debated issues amongst the lobbying organisations.

The Wild Land Group feels it is essential that the code is clear and is 'friendly' but still assertive in keeping to the legislation and the spirit of Act.

In the meantime, you can still take access through the common law position on access - i.e. to ban someone from their land, the landowner needs to get an interdict against that named individual. Indeed this common law position is not changed by the legislation, which confers a statutory right for responsible access. In addition, walking on rights of way is still fully legal at all times, so that if a right of way goes through the curtilage of someone's home, then although you would not have a statutory right of access, you still have a right to proceed because of the existence of the right of way.

Alistair Cant

Key Strategic LINK Seminar

Article

Scottish Environment LINK, the umbrella body for Scottish conservation organisations, held an important seminar on Wild Land in mid-February. The background to the seminar was threefold:

Firstly, there were key publications in the public realm - the SNH policy statement on wildness; the NTS wild land policy, and our SWLG publication on the future of wild land. These documents have raised the awareness and debate in Scotland.

Secondly, there was a need to bring forward robust wild land and landscape arguments to protect areas against intrusive developments, some relating to renewable energy schemes such as the hydro scheme at Shieldaig.

Thirdly, it was realised that although many LINK bodies are keen to protect wild areas for a variety of reasons (access, landscape, habitats, water resource, etc), there was no formal collaboration on protecting such land. This is especially crucial as much of Scotland's wild land does not have legislatively protective designations such as SSSI or SAC/SPA status.

So a very well attended event was held in Pitlochry, bringing most of the key players together to hammer out some common threads. The morning started with some very scenic freezing haar on the low-lying glens and straths, which unfortunately was partly to blame for a SNH speaker being involved in a road accident, luckily without harm to himself or others.

After a set of overview presentations, there were contributions on detailed topics, including our own Fiona Anderson on a planning angle on wild land. There followed workshops and vigorous debate. This had the benefit both of contributors with enormous experience in the field together with those who have been actively involved in lobbying MSPs in Edinburgh over new legislation, such as the Land Reform Act, and implementing the EU Water Framework Directive.

One of the key discussion topics was as to what extent should one actively manage landscapes and regulate land use to stimulate more wildness, as against removing managed activity and allowing natural processes to take over.

The day drew to a close with a closer understanding of the issues and a desire for LINK bodies to work closer together, and with SNH and other organisations. SNH are hoping to hold a seminar this year to publicise their statement on wild land. Everyone at the seminar supported this statement wholeheartedly (apart from reservations that some of the maps could give the wrong impression about how widespread or otherwise wild land is).

It is hoped that this seminar will be the start of a greater focus on wild land that will spread across many organisations and be brought into play in a range of ways. The only disturbing note of the day was the widespread awareness that some of the proposed renewable energy projects could be detrimental to some wild land, and that these projects were getting strong, unquestioning support from elements in the Scottish Executive.

Overall a significant event both for moving the debate forward and bringing greater unity.

Alistair Cant

North Harris Buyout

Article

The islanders of Harris in the Outer Hebrides are celebrating a successful bid earlier this year to buy their land. The 55,000 acre North Harris estate went on the market in April 2002, and the [North Harris Trust](#) was formed to prepare for what has been the largest community buyout in Scotland so far.

The purchase was made in partnership with Ian Scarr-Hall, a businessman from Stoke-on-Trent, who will own the fishing rights and the impressive Amhuinnsuidhe Castle. The community, with its population of about 700, will own the land together with the mineral and shooting rights. This is the first time such a partnership has been arranged in a community buyout. The community were helped by a grant of £1.6m from the Scottish Land Fund and £400,000 from Highlands and Islands Enterprise's Community Land Unit, as well as by the John Muir Trust, the Western Isles Council and Scottish Natural Heritage.

North Harris is the most mountainous area of the Western Isles. It contains Clisham (2622ft), the highest peak in the archipelago as well as numerous other peaks over 2000ft, and the remarkable crag of Sron Ulladale, reputed to be the largest overhang of rock in Britain.

The often tortuous road along the southern coast of North Harris looks out to the Atlantic and the island of Taransay, made famous by the BBC TV series *Castaway*. One or two vehicle tracks cut into the glens from this road, but the interior is largely wild and unspoiled.

Two of the stated aims of the Trust are "To keep North Harris wild and beautiful by safeguarding and enhancing the natural heritage" and "To facilitate enjoyment of, and promote understanding and appreciation of, the outstanding landscape and natural and cultural heritage of North Harris."

This is the kind of thing we like to hear, and we wish the islanders every success.

Letter to the Editor

Article

Dear Editor,

Hill Walking and Guidebooks

I agree with Chris Townsend that guidebooks do often serve a useful purpose. I use them quite frequently. They are especially useful in agricultural areas where the accepted access routes to the hills are not always clear. However I agree with Dave Hewitt that it is rather sad that so many walkers follow the guidebook routes at higher levels.

It was in 1945 that I first started hillwalking but it was not until 1970 that I became interested in Munros. Between 1970 and 1985 I climbed nearly all the Munros, Munro tops and Corbetts, usually alone, with only a compass and one of the old one inch maps as a guide. The old SMC district guides gave only brief advice. The adventure was increased by the fact that these old maps did not mark cliffs or crags. These were glorious days without guidebooks, probably the best days of my life.

Recently I have been re-climbing a few Munros. A couple of years ago I ascended Sgurr nan Coireachan followed by Sgurr Thuilm. I was surprised to find that everybody else was doing this circuit in the other direction which entails a long tedious grassy ascent and a very steep descent on a path which is becoming very badly eroded as folk slither down it. On returning to the car I checked Cameron McNeish's Munro Almanac where, as I suspected, he recommends climbing Sgurr Thuilm first

Good news came with the publication in 1989 of Eric Yeaman's "Handbook of the Scottish Hills" and in 1992 of Alan Dawson's "Relative Hills of Britain", two excellent comprehensive lists with as yet no guidebooks.

Sincerely,

Rowland Bowker
Cumbria