

WILD LAND NEWS 64

Autumn 2005



COMMENT - A changing pattern of ownership

Article

Congratulations to the Assynt Foundation who have bought the 44,000 acre Glencanisp and Drumrunie estates from the Vestey family for £2.9 million. Their purchase was assisted by funding from the Scottish Land Fund, HIE's Community Land Unit, Scottish Natural Heritage, the John Muir Trust and the Tubney Charitable Trust.

The estate includes the iconic peak of Suilven. The new Foundation have hopes to establish the first community owned National Nature Reserve at Drumrunie, and in Glencanisp an emphasis on croft creation, developing eco-tourism and identifying land for affordable housing. Donations to help with the purchase and development costs can be made either direct to the Assynt Foundation or via the John Muir Trust.

There are other potential land purchases in the offing. On South Uist, where both the community and crofters voted in favour of progressing a buy-out of the South Uist estates. This land, comprising 93,000 acres, has been owned by a nine-family farming syndicate since 1961. Two communities on Lewis, in the South Lochs area and the Galston estate are looking to progress possible buy-outs from the current owners.

The combination of new legislation, funding availability and community confidence have begun to change the land ownership pattern in Scotland, especially in the north-west and Hebridean Islands where crofting and community cohesion are strong.

Land reform legislation has strengthened the public interest in the land resource. The provisions for access have endorsed the right of everyone to enjoy our natural heritage, no matter who "owns" it. And for all its faults, the right-to-buy legislation has acknowledged that it is wrong for someone else to hold title to the land on which people live and work and then charge them for being there, while also pocketing the proceeds from public investment in infrastructure in the form of enhanced land values.

Proposals for a National Marine Park

Article

Alistair Cant

The first marine national park could be created in Scotland within 3 years under proposals unveiled by the Scottish Executive, who have asked SNH to identify a site for a park. A likely candidate would be the coast off Oban, where local groups have been campaigning for such a designation since 2003.

This proposal has been welcomed by Scottish Environment LINK who would like to see the idea extended in order to set standards for the whole coast of Scotland in terms of meeting the needs of aquaculture, fisheries, renewable energy and conservation.

Tracks in Glens

Article

David Jarman

'Find us somewhere wild and remote, but this side of Glencoe' came the remit for a short spring weekend with a dubious forecast. This seemed a tall order, until Glen Kinglass came to mind - long admired on the map as a penetrating deep into the mountains between Loch Etive and Loch Tulla, never yet visited nor even heard report of. We could bike in from Taynuilt, camp in the lower glen, and tackle the airy southern approaches to Ben Starav - including the elusive Top of Meall Cruaidh, usually missed because it is out on a limb from the regular circuit.

Once beyond the gloomy forestry, the way in along Loch Etive is magnificent, the eye always led towards Bidean and the Buachailles at its head, framed by the great trench separating Trilleachan and Starav. The unsurfaced private road serves permanent habitations at each side-glen foot - Noe, Liever, Kinglass - and is well-made, if a taxing switch-back for laden cyclists. We can have little quibble with this road, despite the considerable visual intrusion of successive engineering upgrades - better this than a tarmac public road attracting scores of cars into the more secluded reaches of the loch.

Glen Kinglass is much the longest of these side valleys, and the only one to break through the mountains, yet its entrance is so inconspicuous that it could almost be passed unnoticed. My battered 20-year-old map shows a vehicular track up it, serving one cottage (Narrachan, now a ruin) and then nothing until Glenkinglass Lodge, 10 km in from the loch and only seasonally occupied.

The Glen Kinglass ordeal

Now Richard and I had fondly imagined an unobtrusive old Victorian track meandering up the narrow glen floor, and indeed the first few hundred yards through old oakwoods promised just such an idyll. Sad to relate, all the rest of the way to the Lodge has recently been bulldozed to the crudest of standards, with excavated material dumped at random all along the sides, borrow pits dug in every pretty tulloch, ramps cut through the alder fringe to get gravel from the river. The (un)finished product is wide enough for the largest truck.

On any other weekend of the year, we might have been the only visitors to mourn this affront. Unwittingly, we had coincided with the coast-to-coast marathon. At least we had bikes - for the backpackers, what would once have been the finest stretch of walking the whole way was now just another endless dull trudge along an industrial-grade carriageway. And heading east, they probably missed the one kilometre of the old Victorian track to survive. You will find it following the river bank just upstream of Narrachan - a bit wet in places, but still a joy to grieve over.

The insensitivity of the owners or managers here is all the stranger since wild land values are generally being respected over the estate. The oakwoods in the lower glen are regenerating with the aid of exclusion fencing (or at least birch is reviving strongly); there are remnant Scots pines up every side gully, some now protected; conifer forestry is limited to a couple of shelter belts; the stalkers paths have not been made quaddable; one can forgive whims such as an artificial duckpond; one might wonder why a pole-mounted power line is needed all the way up the glen to the Lodge when run-of-river hydro is available on tap for almost free.

The once-wild innermost recesses of Kinglass

The Kinglass cuts back north and west at its head, capturing a former headwater of Glen Dochard, and almost encircling Beinn nan Aighenan. From the ridge, we were taken aback to see this grand, remote side valley filled for over a mile with a new deer-fenced plantation. Apparently, this is intended as native woodland, unlikely ever to yield commercial timber (so extension of the track to access it will hopefully never be required). In wildscape terms, to block off a long-treeless glen floor in this crudely intrusive way seems a poor use of public funds. We would urge FCS and the owners to let this block naturalise at a low density,

removing the fencing as soon as just enough trees are above browse to achieve an open scatter. By contrast, the similar-sized block on the slopes above the Lodge fits much better into the glenscape, and with remnant trees around will probably establish more effectively.

Life becomes so much simpler above 2000 feet. One stops composing letters and articles railing against this ceaseless attrition of once amiable ways into our wild heartlands, and begins to immerse in the pristine. Except that the gale was such that maps stayed in sacks, and later I railed on realising we had bypassed that elusive Top, deceived into thinking that the much finer cone of Stob an Duine Ruaidh (910m) had been it.

Reading your way up Glen Mallie - six abreast

Hamish's Mountain Walk memorably mentions the track up Glen Mallie being so good that he was able to read his way up it for many miles. I had long hankered to visit this paragon among glen roads, and a visit to research the shaping of Gulvain made this my next bike-in after Starav.

Once again, the first mile along the shore of Loch Arkaig was sylvan and timeless. And then it was freshly re-engineered all the way to Glenmallie (ruin). Including an entirely new stretch over the moss to bypass Invermallie, requiring a new river bridge with stout concrete abutments. And again, a mile of the old track survives along the riverside, still a delight and just bikeable.

The difference from Glen Kinglass is that here the road has been constructed to a high standard, with hardly any eyesore pits and tips along the way, and with the banks regraded so that in time they will blend back into the hillside. Here, a contractor noted for his sympathetic eye and his skill with the machine - Murdo Campbell of Strontian - has been engaged, and the contrast is night and day.

Even so, one has to wonder whether a roadway wide enough for a platoon marching six abreast to read their way up the glen is really necessary. The ditch too is often outsize. The scale of roadway built with the natural economy of the pick and shovel has served to carry vehicles of landrover size and more for generations. It is all too easy with a JCB to build quickly and to build big - indeed it would probably take longer and cost more to build a less bulky track that fitted in better. We need mini-JCBs for glen roads.

Here in Glen Mallie (which the Lochiel factor pronounces Mailie), the good news is that the upgraded track is not a precursor for afforestation or some other development, it is simply to ensure safe access for deer-stalking (in a fraction of the time it used to take...). And there are no plans to extend it beyond the ruined house. It used to go another two miles to a walled stock enclosure, but is reverting to bog. This might even remain a trackless glen right through to Gleann Fionnlighe - except that a new track from Fassfern is currently being bulldozed though the 400m col and down into the pass, thus shrinking the area of remote country by yet another couple of miles.

Are there any trackless glens left?

Every other glen I have ventured up recently seems to have vehicular access further up it than the map shows. Majestic Caenlochan now has simple facilitation work for quads and cats right into the trough heads - while much to be preferred to fullscale roading, it still diminishes the wildness. Innocent, sun-sparkling Gleann Meadail in Knoydart (yes, I hit a cracking blue-sky April spell in there) has always had a path up it built to pony-and-trap width, and Kilchoan estate is restoring it pretty sensitively, but this is still allowing engined vehicles to penetrate for the first time.

My son and I went in round the back of Beinn Dearg the other day, from the Dirrie Mor. There is an old path (not on my map) for 2 km to lush alluvial pastures where two stone crofts once stood. It would be so easy for the estate to drive a road in here, and indeed on up Long Corrie for several km, in the interests of safer stalking access. Blessings on them for not doing so, long may it stay that way.

Our dependence on the mindset of estate owners for the survival of glens free of intrusive tracks - or indeed any vehicular access - is almost complete. Andrew Jefford captures this perceptively in 'Peat smoke and spirit' (a new book on Islay which exudes a rare understanding of landscape and wildness):

The highest parts of Islay belong to the Mactaggart family. Sandy Mactaggart says "one of the great things about the east coast is that it is empty but accessible. If you don't keep some empty spaces in the world what will remain?" . At one stage the Mactaggarts were going to put a road in to Proaig, the biggest bay in the Empty Quarter, and a grant had been obtained. "But my nephew John and I said this is one of the last places which is wild. You have to walk to get to it. It's not easy to get to, we shouldn't have a road in there". There is today no road, indeed barely a track, for no-one lives at Proaig anymore. The sheep are collected a couple of times a year.

Paving the glens with good intentions

Of course, tracks up glens don't need planning permission. Even if new ones did, upgrading old ones probably wouldn't. Quite why the public interest which demands Listed Building Consent for the most minor alterations to an ordinary house of mature years - such as putting in a new driveway 2 metres (not 2 kilometres) long - does not extend to wild places dear to countless hearts is one of life's little mysteries.

It is improbable that our new Parliament will dare to extend the scope of planning controls when all the pressures are to dismantle red tape obstacles to progress. There are always other routes to pursue though. How about SNH and the Landowners Federation getting together to produce some best practice advice on fitting tracks into glens unobtrusively, maybe hold a wee seminar for owners and agents, run a few workshops for designers and contractors? How about a bit more cross-compliance for all the public funds and tax breaks going into such estates, as agriculture and forestry subsidies come under single Land Management Contracts? There could even be a heading for remediation works. And more subtly, we should be encouraging the glossy magazines which estate owners and spouses read to reward best practice with prizes and (better still) illustrated features. The 4x4 convoy will look so much more authentic on an artfully minimal old road by a simple Victorian wooden bridge than on some heavy-haulage track.

Don Lindsay at FCS Perth kindly advised on the woodland planting scheme at Glen Kinglass; he draws attention to access tracks created by The Woodland Trust at Glendevon, where the road has been constructed as a cut-and-fill bench and stripped turf drawn back over the bank thus minimising both the landtake and the visual intrusion. Good to know it can be done.

One small gap for wild access

Article

David Jarman reports on Ben Ledi - our first Annual Task

In WLN 63 we announced our first ever 'hands dirty' AGM - taking up Forestry Commission Scotland's challenge to do something about our Ben Ledi whinge (see WLN 63). On a near-perfect June Saturday your Steering Team plus local members from the Gordon and McCrae clans were ferried up to the forest edge in Stank Glen by FCS stalwart Jim Malcolm, with our primitive tools and his chainsaw.

We made remarkably short work of clearing a swathe through brash and waste timber up the nose of Creag Goblach, our Editor being sufficiently moved to extend the task to a viewpoint knoll (or was it just the opportunity for some caber-tossing?). That left us a good half-day for attacking the rogue sitka that was beginning to adorn the skyline above Loch Lubnaig. Some strenuous hand-weeding and forking of several hundred escapees saw about a kilometre of the broad ridge towards Ardnandave Hill 'rewilded', although many remain on less accessible crags. And we survived to repair to Aberfoyle for the AGM, unscathed except for the Editor, whose rash venture into shorts as the day warmed up required him to be de-ticked.

If you want to sample our restored pathless circuit of Stank Glen, the access point is at 575106 - look for the excavated ramp up the forest road cutbank. Stuart Chalmers of FCS Aberfoyle tells us that the direct path shortcutting the forest road zig-zag will be reinstated in 20 years, when the young plantation blocking it is opened up. He also hopes to tackle the sitka invasion into the giant blockfall, and to see more routes up the east side of Ben Ledi opened up as felling progresses.

You might wonder why SWLG is devoting such energy to one of our least-remote hills. Ben Ledi is a handy and well-known demonstrator for three key principles which we are pressing in the current Review of the Scottish Forestry Strategy:

- access to the mountains in afforested areas is not just a matter of made paths to gates in fences - there must be a choice of ways up onto the hill and even more importantly back down again, and some should be through more open ground, between islands of forest with permanent native woodland edges. We call this 'permeable forestry'.
- alien conifers must not be allowed to spread beyond planned limits, or in time they will 'naturalise' and completely alter the character of vast areas - which may still be 'wild', but not as we know it.
- there are some areas of long-established forest which would not be planted today, and from which commercial forestry should be withdrawn, either in favour of native woodland or as more open ground. This kind of rewilding could transform Stank Glen from an economically-marginal lobe of conifer to a joy for thousands.

More on this next time - with news of our current discussions with FCS under our membership of Scottish Environment LINK. Meanwhile, your thoughts on how Scotland's forests might evolve are welcome.

AGM 2005 - Business Report

Article

The AGM was held in mid-June in Aberfoyle and the Treasurer, Tim Ambrose, announced another successful year for the Group. Reserves stand at just over £6,000 and expenditure and income are in balance. Steering Team members were willing to serve for another year and were re-elected. A copy of the Annual Accounts and the succinct Annual Report is available from the Co-ordinator. The Group, as a Scottish Charity, has registered with the new Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR).

There are places vacant on the Steering Team if any member wishes to get involved further. Team meetings are held within the Central Belt on a 4-8 weekly cycle.

Davie Black

As we go to press it appears that the application for consent to construct the 400 KW electricity transmission line between Beauly and Denny is about to be submitted to Scottish Ministers. There is then expected to be an 8 week formal consultation period on the proposal to upgrade the existing 132 kV line to 400 kV. The existing pylons are generally around 25-30 metres (82-98 ft) in height with the proposed new pylons around 50-60 metres (165-195 ft) in height. Some sections of the new line would be on a different alignment to the present line.

It is anticipated that there will be vigorous opposition to this project on the grounds of landscape impact from local communities and other interests located along or close to the line of the proposed powerline. Furthermore many other organisations across Scotland and further south, who are concerned about the impact of the powerline and its relationship to the government's energy and environmental policies, are likely to object.

Questions are also emerging on the need for the upgraded powerline, especially as opposition is increasing to large scale, land based windfarms in Scotland and government policy is beginning to point more in favour of such large scale schemes being located offshore. This is likely to increase the need for subsea rather than long distance land based transmission. There are also developing concerns at the provision of land based transmission lines through northern England, required especially to export wind generated energy to electricity demand centres further south. All this points increasingly for land based wind energy generation in Scotland to be designed to meet local needs, reducing demand on the grid, and further reducing the need for a huge powerline traversing some of Scotland's finest wild country.

Davie Black is the Wildland Campaign Officer for the Ramblers' Association Scotland, Kingfisher House, Auld Mart Business Park, Milnathort, Kinross, KY13 9DA

Tel: 01577 861 222 Fax: 01577 861 333

Email davieb@scotland.ramblers.org.uk

<http://www.ramblers.org.uk/scotland/>



Little and Large: The Skye pylon line disfigures miles of otherwise unspoiled country and culminates in monster pylons either side of the Sound of Sleat.

Wind Farms on Lewis - decision time

Article

Alistair Cant

As readers may be aware, two large wind farm developments are proposed for the Isle of Lewis. The first, on Barvas Moor, was planned for 234 turbines of a height of 140 metres. This scheme, by Lewis Wind Power, has been reduced to 209 turbines following consultation, as those near communities have been removed from the plans.

This very controversial proposal has seen objections from Scottish Natural Heritage, RSPB, The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and many others, with locals very divided on the issue. At the recent elections the sitting MP lost his seat, and it has been alleged that this was partly due to his support at that time for these developments. A second scheme of 130 turbines has been proposed for the Eiskan estate by Beinn Mhor Power. The scheme is partly sited in a National Scenic Area. Council officials recommended refusal on the proposal owing to the impact on visual amenity.

However both projects were given the stamp of approval (subject to conditions) by the Western Isles Council. The proposals now go to the Scottish Executive who will make the final decision.

Members are urged to object to these schemes on the grounds of their impact on landscape, visual amenity, rare peatlands and birds. Please write to:

Allan Wilson MSP, Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, The Scottish Executive, 6th Floor, Meridian Court, Cadogan Street, Glasgow G2 6AT.

Go Ahead for Glendoe Hydro Scheme

Article

Anne Macintyre reports on a large-scale development in the Highlands

At the end of July Scottish Ministers announced that Scottish and Southern Energy PLC have been given planning permission for the construction and operation of a hydro powered electricity generating station at Glen Doe near Fort Augustus.

This scheme includes:

- Construction of a large dam (1000 metres long) at the head of Glen Tarff
- Storage of 11.5 million cubic metres of water from a catchment area of 75 square kilometres
- Network of aqueducts and pipes feeding water into the reservoir
- 8.5km tunnel from the dam to an underground power station below Borlum Hill at the eastern edge of Loch Ness to where the water would be discharged after passing through turbines
- The power station will have capacity to generate 100MW of electricity
- Connection to the public network by means of an underground 132kV power line from the new sub-station to the existing grid at Auchteraw (this connection will be operated by Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission Limited and is not included in the consent although its potential impacts have been addressed in the Environmental Statement)

SWLG objected to the proposal submitted in May 2003 (See [WLN 58 - Autumn 2003](#)) on the grounds that the scale and location of the development was inappropriate and it would have a significant and irreversible impact on the landscape.

Responses to the proposals from other agencies and individuals included:

- SNH found the proposal acceptable subject to conditions to protect the natural heritage
- SEPA originally objected to the application but later withdrew this provided conditions were put in place in respect of management of foul drainage, on-site pollution and waste management during construction and need for peat management scheme to ensure sustainable development
- Historic Scotland advised that the proposal would not have any significant impact on either of the two scheduled monuments in the area - General Wade's Military Road and the Caledonian Canal
- RSPB withdrew their original objection provided that mitigation measures in respect of the Glendoe Lochans Special Protection Area were included as a condition
- Scottish Canoe Association expressed concerns about the proposal and made a number of suggestions to improve recreational canoeing opportunities in the area
- Highland Council recommended approval provided conditions were attached
- 32 other representations were made raising concerns about the impact on transport and traffic (18 representations); landscape and visual impacts (16); impacts on tourism, amenity, recreation and access (16); and ecological impacts (12)

The consent for the proposal has over 30 conditions attached covering bird monitoring, water vole mitigation plans, review of trees for bat roosts, spawning habits of the Arctic Charr, otter disturbance, peat stability and slide mitigation statement, community liaison procedures, noise monitoring and management and recording of archeological features.

The only condition in relation to landscape and visual impact is the requirement to submit a code of landscape reinstatement prior to work commencing.

The planning consent and conditions from the Scottish Executive stretches to 14 pages but there is no explanation or justification for the decision by Ministers to approve this proposal. A single sentence states,

"The Scottish Ministers have weighed all material considerations and have concluded that there is no need to conduct a public inquiry before reaching their decision. The Scottish Ministers also note that the development is consistent with Government policy on the promotion of renewable energy."

Despite the fact this development will have a massive impact on this area of the Monadhliath Mountains there will be no opportunity to test the proposal through an open and transparent public inquiry. Yet again we see that landscape and wild land values are swept aside to make way for renewable energy developments at any cost.

Wildwood Management

Article

Marina Llewellyn argues for the expansion of our scattered remnants

11% of Britain is tree covered, yet most of this is Spruce. 10% of our forests are natural¹, yet, only 1% is remnant wildwood². The Forestry Commission states that there is no "virgin" forest left³, the closest we have being classed as "ancient semi-natural" - our slightly coppiced wildwood remnants. In their guidelines, the F.C. respects that "Many woodland species depend entirely for their survival on the continued existence of these habitats." Despite this acknowledgment, the F.C. sees such woods as having "value as an economic resource" and "takes appropriate opportunities for wood production for a range of markets."⁴ Wildwood remnants are loosely referred to as "old stored coppice" which the landowner is encouraged to convert to "high forest" - a timber production factory.

There is no excuse to fell native trees in a wildwood remnant. I quote George Peterkin on non-intervention - "By doing nothing the result should by definition, be natural. By starting with a remnant of the original forest cover still containing all the original species, the naturalness should be close to the original."⁵ Surely George Peterkin supports the conservation of such woods judging by his statement "The need for wilderness originated in cities as a counterpoint to the artificial contrivances of modern living and a release from the claustrophobia of urban crowds. This need is particularly acute in Britain?.." ⁶

The Habitats Directive resulting from the Rio Summit has been treated by the British government as irrelevant, despite the fact that Britain agreed to enforce it. Importantly, the Habitats Directive recognises that certain forests have "spiritual value". This sentiment was expressed by John Muir in 1931 when he wrote. "I went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."

Many including the F.C. consider George Peterkin among the top national conservation experts, so again I quote him: "I believe that maintaining an element of wilderness for the psychological health of the nation is important. Perhaps more so than anyone can prove." ⁷

The diverse ecosystems in our original wildwood must be conserved. We need non-intervention in our ancient semi-natural woods. We also need their expansion; most are very small and a forest becomes stable at 20 hectares. Only management to counteract negative human influences should be applied, eg controlling rhododendron and sycamores.

Legislation similar to the Habitats Directive which came straight out of the Rio Summit should be enforced. The British draft did not make mandatory the management of ancient semi-natural woods for conservation only.

The protection and expansion of wildwood remnants is imperative.

Footnotes

1. FC publication "Scotland's trees, woods and forests"
2. Forestry practice - Guide 5
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Peterkin G. - "Natural Woodland"
6. Peterkin G. - "Woodland Conservation and Management"
7. Ibid.

Review of the Scottish Forestry Strategy

Article

This document is available from the FC at 231 Corstorphine Road, Edinburgh, EH12 7AT and on-line at www.forestry.gov.uk/consultations.

The Scottish Forestry Strategy was published in November 2000 and this is a major 5 year review. Comments were sought by 16 September, but there will be a second stage of the consultation process in early 2006.

SWLG has submitted a response; for copies of this please contact Alistair Cant, our Co-ordinator.

Alistair Cant

The Scottish Executive has published its White Paper outlining its plans for streamlining the planning system in Scotland. It has two key negatives. Firstly the Executive have not taken on board the concept of a 'Third Party Right of Appeal' after consultation on the issue. Secondly the White Paper proposes a severe curtailment of public rights for schemes identified as 'National Developments'. If the changes were implemented, then such schemes could not be challenged on their 'need' if Ministers deem them to be of National importance.

The Scottish Wild Land Group Steering Team sees this crucial proposal of 'National Developments' as hugely important to defeat, as otherwise citizens in Scotland will be rendered impotent in respect of commenting on key planning proposals. The full details are on the web at www.scotland.gov.uk, and for Scottish Environment LINK's views, see www.scotlink.org

How wild was Knoydart?***David Jarman***

Walking into Knoydart is a long and arduous haul, as befits any true pilgrimage. Four passes lead in through the Rough Bounds, across the main watershed of Scotland; the weather legendarily turns from pretty bad to much worse as one goes. This gives rise to the prevailing image of Knoydart as both wild and remote. But in half-a-dozen visits to all parts of the peninsula, I have never yet walked in, and only once walked out, along Loch Hourn.

Did I say 'peninsula'? Knoydart is thought of as an almost-island because it is the only chunk of mainland Britain with a village and tarmac road accessible to motorised traffic only by sea. Really though, it is not a peninsula, in that sea level would have to rise by an improbable 200m to isolate it by joining Loch Nevis to Loch Hourn - by when Scotland would be an archipelago. Nor is Knoydart a promontory, like Ardnamurchan. If anything, it is rather at the heart of things, with Skye opposite, less remote than Cape Wrath, or the heart of the Monadhliath (for a few months more at least).

In fact, Knoydart is very accessible by sea, depending how long you have, how deep your purse is, and how much of yourself and your goods you want to keep dry when you disembark. (Here I allude to the state of the public boarding point at Mallaig, which if it were a railway station platform rather than a mailboat quay would have been condemned as outrageously inadequate long ago).

We landlubbery hillgoers tend to overlook just how commonplace sea travel was until tarmac and internal combustion inverted communications geography. Indeed I only know two people who both sail and climb, and they keep them seasonally separate, rather than boating in to remote hills. But for most Knoydart people today, getting about by water is natural. It took the appearance of a local lass joining our JMT tree-planting squad at Inbhir Dhorrcail for the day to bring this home to me - her dad brought her round from one of the roadless crofts, in as little time as a city parent would take their kid across town to a music lesson.

So in the days of subsistence settlement, Knoydart would have been no more or less inaccessible or 'wild' than any other west coast mountain area, whether mainland or island. And there would have been informal drove routes overland from Knoydart, making export of cattle as feasible as from any neighbouring area. Nor is Knoydart particularly barren: many of

its slopes offer good grazing, especially the square kilometres of fractured terrain which are naturally free-draining. The 'Norwegian' expanses of bare rock are confined to a tract only about six miles wide, where glacial scouring and breaching across the watershed were most intense and on exceptionally resistant strata (although the Rough Bounds may be tough going, it is often the smoothness of the outcrops which is remarkable).

Even the harshest land had some economic value at the height of sheep-ranching in the Highlands: it is a considerable surprise, on finally purchasing the 1:25K map, to find that the most prominent artefact in east Knoydart is a fence stretching from Barrisdale round behind Luinne Bheinn, negotiating the Carnach gorge, threading between Ben Aden and Sgurr na Ciche, and joining the famous wall along the Garbh Chioch ridge. In 1980, approaching Luinne Bheinn from the south, I 'crossed the relict sheep fence, rather unexpected here'. Indeed.

In the 19th century, Knoydart shared in the accessibility of all the west coast to the 'puffers', and of course to the steam yachts of the gentry.

But today, for the vast majority who sail the tarmac rather than the waves, Knoydart is perceived as cut-off, inaccessible, remote, and thus wild. Given the totemic status of this tract of the Highlands, it is curious to discover that Knoydart is not cut off by natural barriers so much as by the hand of man and the vagaries of public policy. Let us take those four passes by which you can walk in:

- on the south, the classic right of way is from Kinlocharkaig over Mam na Cloich Airde (315m), down to the head of Loch Nevis, and over Mám Meadail to Inverie. There is a path most of the way, but it is made longer by the public road stopping well short of the head of Glen Dessary, a place motor vehicles can now reach by virtue of obscenely intrusive afforestation. The rough headland above Sourlies is a considerable obstacle unless the tide is out. The Carnach River was a serious barrier when the footbridge was washed away, but (pace Hamish Brown) with Camusrory an oasis inhabited by crofters or by lairds, a bridge or a ferry boat would always have been to hand here.
- on the north, the 225m pass from Glen Garry over to Kinloch Hourn has long had a road, and accidents of land ownership and council policy have seen it tarmacked and open to all motorists. The walk-in to Barrisdale along the loch is thus only 6 miles, however exhausting the improvised path - why foot it when you can boat it, earlier generations would have said, and indeed canoeing down with the tide in a heatwave is about as close as I can imagine to transcendent rapture.
- in between, there are two less well-known routes in via Loch Quoich. One branches off up Gleann Cósaidh and over a 275m col into Glen Barrisdale, past its magnificent fragments of wild pinewood.
- the other continues through the lowest of the four passes, now at 200m but once a little lower - drowned by Loch Quoich when it was dammed at both ends for hydro power, along with the lodge settlement of Kinlochquoich and most of the track in from the Kinloch Hourn road. Strangely the natural valley line west of the watershed dam lacks a built path for the middle mile of the way down to the Carnach River to Camusrory. A track does however rise up over Mám Unndalain and down to Barrisdale.

It is this last route that intrigues me. Coming up from Barrisdale, as I did recently, it is sadly much deteriorated, but it was obviously designed with considerable care. Unlike the more popular paths, it has been made just wide enough for a normal wheeled vehicle. Yet at 525m Mám Unndalain is almost twice as high as the other passes in to Barrisdale, more akin to Mám Barrisdale and Mám Meadail which have well-built pony-and-trap paths over them. The road over Mám Unndalain is an engineering feat almost comparable with Bealach na Bà to Applecross. It descends some way east of the pass before traversing in to Kinlochquoich, but my recollections and those of Keith Miller from the 80s suggest it was only a path there, in

places a mere deer trod. So was it ever intended to be completed as a road along which people could be conveyed, rather than walk? Did the wealthy owners who developed Barrisdale as a farming and sporting estate aspire to civilised access overland as well as by sea? Over what period did Mám Unndalain function, and what kind of vehicles ever used it?

Imagine that Loch Quoich had never been dammed, and that Barrisdale had qualified legally as a settlement meriting a public road - as Kinloch Hourn or Arnisdale do today. We would be able to drive at will to the foot of Luinne Bheinn and Ladhar Bheinn.

Show how wild is Knoydart today?

In 1980, the Inverie I sailed in to was very much private property. The council might send in a teacher and a road crew, but most of Knoydart was one autonomous fiefdom. I was met off the boat by the factor, told I could stay in the bothy, and advised where I could and could not go. OK, it was September, but there was no other accommodation, and no-one else about. There was a 'club' for the villagers; I didn't venture in. My notes now grate, cap-doffingly - 'a privileged entry into an exceptional area'.

Inverie today is a welcoming base for the munroist or destination for the pass-walker, with a celebrated pub (real ale from both Skye and Herefordshire, surreal), a fine teashop/restaurant, and a splendid bunkhouse up at Torrie. All three munros are within a 10km radius of this mecca. Wild land in the large sense Knoydart is not. In the Rough Bounds, all the munros and corbetts can be reached in a day from the Arkaig or Kinloch Hourn roads.

In 1980, paths such as that over Mám Meadail were notably untrodden. This year, the main paths over the passes and the prescribed routes up the Munros were well patronised. There is no sense of privilege about being here: instead, the places to which I feel privy have shrunk to out-of-the-way recesses. This is not a complaint: it is a welcome democratisation of wild experience, which necessarily changes radically what we mean by 'wildness'. It changes it from an objective statement of desertedness or unvisitedness to a subjective sense of differentness from our everyday urban crush. Having pontificated thus, in three perfect April days on the main ridges this year I saw not a soul above the glen road.

Just talking about a place and making it better known can reduce its mystique and thus its perceived wildness. Telling people in 1980 that I was going to Knoydart seemed about as wild as going to Madagascar. Today, you would raise more of an eyebrow by saying you were going to Cornwall (this allusion assumes some familiarity with the Hitch-hikers Guide). In 1980, nothing had drawn any attention to Knoydart since the post-war land raid. Then it came up for sale, and several turbulent years ensued before the high-profile purchases by JMT, Sir Cameron Mackintosh, and the community-led Foundation made Knoydart familiar by word and picture.

We are now in a different era where 'wildness' has to be redefined, and refined, as perceptions and expectations shift; as the human need to find solace in relatively unspoiled surroundings increases. How does Knoydart shape up to such re-evaluation?

Between my original metric map of 1974 and my new 1:25K map of 2002, there are three prominent changes to the geography of Knoydart:

- large blocks of 'commercial' forestry have been planted in Gleann na Guiserein. This is a dull strath, the least sensitive landscape in Knoydart, but nonetheless a grievous intrusion into a core wild area, with the sharp-edged plantations intruding onto the very footslopes of Ladhar Bheinn. It is disheartening to learn that this heavily-subsidised project is now written off as uneconomic to harvest for the foreseeable future. The timber is far in excess of domestic requirements on Knoydart, even for

energy (its private hydro plant is greener than burning wood). If simply felled to waste or left to decay, it will be a worse blot on the landscape. This kind of site, that should never have been planted, should be made eligible for funding to convert to native woodland.

- what used to be paths from Inverie over to Inverguseran and Folach are now landrover tracks. I don't mind this, since it makes the farm at Inverguseran viable (and it let me bike to explore the west coast on an off day). Few other vehicle tracks seem to have been made, which is a blessing, although the path up Gleann Meadail seems to be getting restored to a standard which will allow quad bikes at least. And my reverie on Luinne Bheinn recently was not enhanced by two scramble bikes ascending to Mám Barrisdale (but then, are they any more selfish than the boy racers jetting through the Sound of Sleat?).
- the dotted line with the talismanic symbol 'F' came out in 1974 from Mallaig not just to Inverie and Tarbet, but right up to Camusrory. Did this last leg ever operate as a public ferry? Not according to my SMC Guide of that era. It now stops at Tarbet, and I have never managed to get an affordable ride up to the head of Loch Nevis, which I suppose has to be good for core wild land.

At this moment, one of the greatest physical changes Knoydart has seen is under way - the new pier and ro-ro slip. Anyone who has struggled at the present structure can only welcome this, but it will be interesting to see to what extent it makes Knoydart more like everywhere else and less special (like the Tesco effect on our town centres). Apparently a traffic regulation order has already been made preventing anyone bringing a motor vehicle onto Knoydart unless they are genuinely resident there, and then restricted to one per household. But the more that tourism becomes the mainstay of any economy, the more temptation there is to go in for scooter hire or whatever. Even an influx of ecotourists can compromise the experience of wildness - the Everest base camp effect.

There are more subtle impingements on wildness. The John Muir Trust has agonised with itself for several years over the acceptability of deer fencing on the wildest north side, and it seems likely that this will be removed as soon as woodland regeneration has been achieved. Having done a couple of tasks there, I find the young plantation has an unnatural feel, however 'authentic', which will take a while to wear off. It is also amusingly perverse to devote time to maintaining the stalkers path which considerably reduces the wildness of Coire Dhorrcail. It may be useful for culling, and a handcrafted historic relict, but is it any different in principle from a bulldozed track into a remote area?

Other deer exclusion fences have been erected, with public subsidy, at the Barrisdale Caledonian pinewood (Doire Asamaidh), and above the south portal of Gleann Meadail. The latter has certainly failed, with not one young birch to be seen after ten years, and plenty of deer evidence inside it, and ought to be rethought or removed as a visual intrusion and obstacle within wild land.

But the detail which most sticks in my mind lingers from that off-day coastal exploration. It was good to see the crofts at Cnoc Gorm and Croulin inhabited, and accessible only by sea or a vestigial path. It is understandable that they should want to have a reliable telephone link. It is just a pity that BT ran their conspicuous pale grey cable along the path route, unburied. It is rulebook stupidity that the engineers fitted standard white plastic protective sheathing to the sections of cable which dangled across the numerous wee gullies - sheathing which has snapped apart and now bestrews the way in 2m sections which will never biodegrade and which no-one may ever bother to remove.

This 'wildness audit' has looked at Knoydart as a visual landscape: much more could be said about the management of the land and the deer, the naturalness of the wildlife, the subjective experience of the wild as a climatic or a social phenomenon. So to counterpoint all these varied perceptions of the wild, Knoydart is the place where I have spent longest reclining in a jacuzzi, at least an hour. I just happened to indulge this tamest of inactivities in

a perfectly-contoured polished-rock pool in Coire Dhorrcail, after sweating over Ladhar Bheinn in a west-coast heatwave, with a canoe down by the shore to carry me effortlessly away - till a headwind got up. And my view out from the pool was unsullied by anything tangibly unwild (that dratted pylon line to Skye above Kinloch Hourn being obscured in the haze).

Letter to the Editor

Article

Dear Sir,

The articles by James Fenton and David Jarman in Wild land news 63 raise interesting questions about what we mean by wild land and why we value it. From the viewpoint of a hypothetical tourist, Fenton laments the destruction of traditional vistas of open moorland by encroaching forestry. Jarman queries the obstacles to human access posed by impenetrable conifer thicket on Ben Ledi and spreading tussock grass and rushes elsewhere (the wading-through-treacle problem). Both authors view wild land through an anthropocentric prism.

This raises the question: is wild land valuable only as a resource for human use (for recreation, scenic beauty, spiritual refreshment or whatever), or does it also have some value in its own right, independent of man? It is possible to see nature - almost by definition - as something non-human, radically other, and therefore (perhaps) evoking almost religious emotions like awe or reverence. Fenton comes close to recognising this when he argues for the conservation of open moorland as an ecosystem that is relatively rare in global terms, as opposed to forest ecosystems which are relatively common, suggesting that biodiversity is valuable in its own right. But there is perhaps a deeper issue lurking behind this - a distinction between ecosystems which are "natural" and those which are essentially human artefacts.

There is a further dimension to be considered. Does it make any sense to talk about natural heritage and nature conservation in isolation from questions of cultural heritage? (Personally I would like to abandon the whole notion of natural heritage precisely because it muddies the boundary between nature and culture.) Few if any of Scotland's landscapes and ecosystems are entirely "natural": most have been modified by centuries or millennia of human intervention. Many of the Highland areas that we now value as wild land have passed from a semi-natural state influenced by human hunter-gathering, cattle transhumance and micro-agriculture, through monocultural management regimes aimed at sheep, deer or grouse production, to their current status as a kind of managed semi-nature.

If we are serious about understanding our historical roots (and hence our future potential), we obviously have an obligation to conserve cultural landscapes as well as natural ecosystems. This raises still more questions: for any given site, should nature or culture take priority? And if we are trying to conserve or replicate a cultural landscape, which cultural phase do we select? In different centuries, the same moor may have been grazed by cattle, sheep and deer. Obviously there are many different factors to consider, not least climate change: there is no point in trying to replicate an eighteenth-century cultural landscape if climatic conditions have changed decisively in the meantime.

The answer is surely that sites must be considered on a local, case by case basis, but also within a clear national and global planning framework. For any site, we need to consider what makes it special, and the views of local people should play a major role here. But we also need a national and global perspective: it is daft to conserve or create many sites of one type, while allowing other, equally important types of site to wither away.

But - going back to my original question - maybe we also need some sites that are not actively planned and managed at all, where nature is just allowed to go its own sweet way. Of course this is a counsel of perfection: no site can be protected from the impacts of global

warming, air pollution, etc. But maybe we should designate some areas of maximum non-intervention. If nature manages to create some environments that are inaccessible to humans, then the best of luck to it. Maybe that is what "natural" wild land means.

Yours,
Dennis Smith
11A Marchall Crescent,
Edinburgh EH16 5HL