

WILD LAND NEWS 69

Summer 2007



Beaully-Denny Transmission Line

Article

That Inquiry - the stifling of dissent?

The Beaully-Denny Inquiry has just closed here in Perth as I write in early May. The strategic stage that is, because the three local sessions will trundle on till the end of the year, but anyone turning up to object to the line will be told they're too late, it is only about local adjustments from now on.

As well as giving evidence for the Beaully-Denny Landscape Group (the consortium of six national campaigning bodies), I attended for some days to hear the developer's landscape witnesses and others. Chastened, disheartened, and disillusioned, I have to conclude that our costly Public Inquiry system is neither open to the public nor designed to get to the heart of the matter. And this is despite it having so recently been revamped by Holyrood to make it more accessible and 'transparent'.

In a previous life, I took part in several mega Inquiries, where the forces pro et contra were evenly matched, and whatever the outcome, at least everyone had their say and all the relevant facts were brought out.

Here at Perth, I knew we would be David -v- Goliath, but I didn't expect our catapult to be confiscated as well. We couldn't afford a QC, and everyone knew we wouldn't be able to afford to mount legal challenges if mistreated, so that at every turn we have been made to feel like annoying bit-part onlookers, with the real business being between the Developers and the Official Objectors (Councils and SNH). The three Reporters [=Inspectors in England] deferred time and again to the arguments of their QCs, while swatting our solicitor away. They had a Technical Assessor for the Developer's witnesses, but it wasn't deemed necessary for him to assess our expert witnesses.

At one point, our witness Prof Andrew Bain was dissecting the economic justification for the line, and the QC objected that he was introducing new material not contained in his 'precognition' - the written evidence we had all had to submit in January. The Reporters stopped him, and made a great hoo-ha of striking out a great swathe of their notes. It really felt like being at a show trial in the soviet era - Joseph Heller would have been proud - "you have just given us the proof of your innocence, but because you didn't provide it to us before the trial began we haven't heard you say it, even though you could only possibly have obtained it after the prosecution produced their evidence." We can only conclude that the aim is to ensure that the Ministers - whoever they turn out to be - only have to comprehend one version of the economics when they take their decision.

Kafka would have been even prouder of this one. Highland Council were there as Objectors like us. But in fact they were only objecting to short bits of the line which they wanted undergrounded - they had declared their support for the principle of the line. In chatting to Highland planners beforehand, I had asked what their attitude would be to an alternative route, either overland via Aberdeen or better still, subsea. They readily agreed that these would be much better options, much less damaging to the landscape. So why hadn't they

been exploring them, or even joining us in advocating them? We are only there to consider proposals that are put before us, they said. When their turn on the stand came, our lawyer sought to cross-examine them, and to his and my amazement was stopped by the Reporters. Why? Because they are objectors and you are objectors so you are both on the same side of the table and we don't allow 'friendly' questioning.

When my own turn came, our lawyer tried to ask me about my experience in contesting unwelcome proposals such as quarries, where I had explored both the need for the product and alternative sources. The Councils' QC jumped in with 'don't answer that question' and insisted this was impugning the professionalism of her clients. The Reporters upheld the objection, clearly not wanting to hear any more about alternatives, when their remit was quite obviously to deal only with the proposal on the table as expeditiously as possible.

Most galling of all was the time pressure - on us. The Developer's QC had several weeks to lead her numerous witnesses, with one or often two of them covering minute sub-divisions of specialisms. She often led them through their precognitions for an hour or more. The Councils and SNH had a whole week, even though they were only addressing limited aspects of amenity. We were allocated a couple of days. We were the only major in-principle objectors (Highlands before Pylons put up a brave show, but with amateur witnesses from the Ullapool area they were not directly relevant to this project), and we had already helped the Reporters by combining into one body to minimise duplication. At every step our lawyer was subjected to quite unwarranted pressure not to cross-examine at any length and certainly not to lead his witnesses on their precognitions, which were to be taken strictly as read and no additional material introduced. When finally he countered that he was merely seeking to lead us in the way that the Developer's QC had led hers, the Reporters simply prevaricated. Thus of perhaps fifty points I had prepared to make as reasonable and helpful expansions of my evidence, based on normal practice at past inquiries, I was able to smuggle in perhaps a dozen, at random, on the pretext that they were in some way responding to points made by earlier witnesses. Thus it was that the principal landscape arguments against the line and the endless slicing away at our heritage were over within an afternoon, finished before five and home for tea early.

Most Pyrrhic moment

- Highland's planning chief John Rennilson on the witness stand saying that all the wind farms they were expecting to approve amounted to a huge landscape sacrifice, and they were looking for this to be recognised by undergrounding a few miles of the line in a well-heeled residential backwater near Inverness where few visitors will ever see it. Wonder why the developer's QC asked me whether pylons or turbines are more intrusive?

Saving grace #1

- discovering that Mountains of the Mind author Robert Macfarlane was an SWLG member (courtesy of his Tomintoul grandfather), and happy to give us an excellent quote:*

"The landscape loss inflicted by the construction of the B-D transconnector, and the windfarms it would enable, would be severe and irreversible. The transconnector would abolish qualities that are - in the correct sense of that much mis-used word - unique. In cost-benefit terms, approving the transconnector would be a poor decision, for the gains made would be far outweighed by the economic and cultural losses to the Highland region. But in terms of those other, less quantifiable forms of landscape value - spiritual, cultural, ecological, aesthetic - it would be catastrophic. "Wild country is a thing of very high value", wrote the Scottish explorer-philosopher WH Murray in 1965, "It is a value that has been greatly underestimated by all but a very few of our planners... The remnants of wild Scotland will become a priceless asset, if we resolve now to keep them"."

Saving grace #2

- being told by the distinguished landscape architect Mark Turnbull that I ought to publish my evidence, since no-one seems to have attempted such an audit of all the attritions the Highlands have suffered over the years. This prompted John Mayhew to lend me the NTS copy of Highland Scenery, which they commissioned almost 50 years ago from WH Murray, and led to the National Scenic Areas being designated. Murray excluded several areas as already too tarnished, and laid down a benchmark for revisit. All it needs is someone to line up a publisher and sponsor some (green) travel to check out parts such as Moidart and Caithness with which I still insufficiently familiar.

Beaulieu-Denny will almost certainly go ahead unless governments and regulators wake up to the false economics. What we have to learn from it is that individual projects will keep on wriggling through until we wake the nation up to the idea of the Highlands as a whole still be a national treasure just about intact enough to be worth looking after, as our most precious and special long-term asset.

**Robert MacFarlane's book "The Wild Places" is due to be published this September*

The Public Inquiry was attended on our behalf by David Jarman as a member of the Beaulieu-Denny Landscape Group. The above article is based on his impressions of the proceedings.

Perils of the Gaelic

Notes and Queries

An Outer Hebridean Member has taken me to task over my review of 'Hostile Habitats' - I should know better than to slip in anything to do with the Gaelic. So I have gone back to author Mark Wrightham to check his sources. Firstly, if the gaelic for tormentil really is cara-mhìl a'choin, it should only have that one hyphen, not three! But Tom Prentice has chipped in to point out that Collins Book of Scottish Wild Flowers gives it as cairt-làir.

Our member says he has never come across any derivation of Meall Corranaich as hill of the bracken corrie, from raineach. Tom has come to Mark's rescue, being bang up to date with the new edition of Peter Drummond's Scottish Hill Names. This states 'Meall Corranaich has several possible interpretations (including meall coire rainich, bracken corrie). but among them is hill of the sickle (corran)'.
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David Jarman

Chris Townsend walks from west to east and finds much that won't feature in the tourist brochures



Loch Mullardoch, with its concrete dam and ugly drawdown scars.

Photo:Chris Townsend

This is the story of a walk across the Highlands in search of ugliness. I've walked from coast to coast on the annual TGO Challenge eleven times now. This year though I approached the event from a slightly different, and, it must be said, less positive viewpoint. I'm a member of the Beaulay-Denny Landscape Group as the representative of the MCoS and I was impressed with David Jarman's evidence to the inquiry and the picture he painted of the slow attrition wearing away the wild character of the Highlands. In an email to the B-D Group David wrote "amazing how difficult it is to get hold of 'ugly Highlands' images - I don't take them, others I have asked don't" in the context of producing a presentation showing the effect the proposed Beaulay-Denny pylons would have. As I was soon to set out to walk from Strathcarron to St Cyrus I thought that maybe I would take some "ugly Highland images". I too had never taken many of these in the past (I have a few of the Cairngorm funicular) and I knew full well why. When in the hills I want to appreciate the beauty and wildness that remain and I try and block out any ugliness or intrusions. For that reason I've always planned a high level route, keeping as far as possible to the relatively unspoilt summits and passes and away from the degraded glens. I did the same this year but once I'd started photographing intrusions and damage I found that I couldn't ignore it as easily as in the past. In fact I found myself looking for opportunities to include fences and bulldozed roads in photos rather than ways to cut them out. I can't say I enjoyed this different mindset but it did make me very aware again of just how damaged some of our hill areas are. And I did return with a collection of "ugly Highlands" images.



The line of pylons that are such a grim feature of the Corrieairick Pass.

Photo:Chris Townsend

The first intrusion came in the form of a deer fence above Strathcarron complete with high stile and gate through which I could look across the strath to the harsh angular lines of a forestry plantation above which rose the dark outlines of the Achnashellach hills. Soon after a rusty old iron gate between two tall fence posts reminded me that such intrusions are not new. Over the Bealach Alltan Ruairidh a bulldozed road led to Bendronaig Lodge, an old road that was not too horrible compared with some I was to see. The ugliness faded as I crossed the boggy wastes between Loch Calavie and the Allt Coire nan Each, noting the old tree roots sticking out of the peat showing this area was once wooded, and then traversed the An Riabhachan – Sgurr na Lapaich ridge, finishing with a splendid wild camp on the col with Carn nan Gobhar. Up here the sight of the bathtub rings on the reservoirs either side of this ridge didn't really impinge on my joy. The next day I descended to the fake loch called Mullardoch with its bleak, bare shores and crossed Glen Cannich below the massive concrete ramparts of the dam. A blizzard on Toll Creagach cut out all views of ugliness and beauty then it was down to always attractive Glen Affric, though I was more than acutely aware of all the deer fencing and the straight unnatural lines between the protected and unprotected land. Crossing to Glen Moriston I passed through some really nasty clear-cut forest on the way to Cougie before leaving the glen on the old military road and marching with a double line of pylons that looked like H.G.Well's Martians and were just as alien to Fort Augustus and the start of the climb to one of the most trashed places in the Highlands, the Corrieairick Pass, noting how ironic are the signs saying that General Wade's road here is a protected historic monument. Maybe one day we can keep just one pylon – in a city park - as a historic monument and reminder. Warning signs told of the construction of the dam in Glen Doe just to the east, a huge intrusion into what was a vast wild area. The Corrieairick is a tangle of pylons, power lines and bulldozed roads and I was happy to escape it for a walk east over the misty, rain-strewn hills to the Monadh Liath. A short section of Strathspey with its main road and railway led to Glen Feshie, one of my favourite places but where I was horrified to discover that the bulldozed road in the upper glen, built without planning permission some years ago, has been renewed in places while in others 4WD vehicles have very recently gouged great ruts in the ground. Escaping the despoiled glens again I climbed lonely Carn Ealar and An Sgarscoch then returned to tracks and roads at White Bridge from where I walked to Braemar. Lochnagar was magnificent on a wild day of high winds, hail, rainbows and flashes of sharp sunlight. I circled round high above the Dubh Loch to Cairn Bannoch and Broad Cairn. Reality intruded on the descent of the latter, the wide eroded track up its south eastern flanks being in sore need of repair. The bulldozed roads at the head of Corrie Chash are depressing too as are the gouged tracks on Sandy Hillock. From the latter I crossed the rolling heather and peat bog moorland to Glen Lee, where a bulldozed track runs deep into the hills almost to the head of the glen. Once on the track I was on the downhill slope to the coast and stuck on roads the rest of the way. One and half final days of striding out saw me

on the beach at St Cyrus staring out at the sea. It had been a good walk, despite all the damage. But someone really ought to do something about it. I guess that means us.

Chris Townsend is the author of numerous books and guides, and is a regular contributor to TGO. He is also a member of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland's Access & Conservation Committee.

Wild Wales - As not protected by Parc Cenedlaethol Eryri Article

*With National Park status seemingly unable to give assured protection to our Scottish landscapes, **David Jarman** goes south and crosses two borders to see how things are done in Wales.*



The western prow of Cadair Idris will lose its classic dignity if invading conifers take hold in the meadows below.

Photo: David Jarman

Some miles inland of Dolgellau, up tortuous lanes to Llanfachreth, over an endlessly rocky hill which fails to attain even Corbett height, and across an interminable bog, there rises eventually a spine presenting a craggy rampart to trackless wastes, upon which quixotic goal I once set my sights for a late-teen birthday outing, the point of which my father singularly failed to see. Rhobell Fawr (2408') and Dduallt (2171') come to mind now as my epitome of 'wild Wales', remote and untamed. They were two of the last outposts to fall, during a short decade in which my school club and my father and latterly my thumb had taken me to nearly all the Welsh hills, allowing me to sign them off with a traverse of the magnificent Harlech dome and move on to greater things in Caledonia.

We never doubted that they were 'wild', with many of our visits being in cloud and wet, and with gales or snowdrifts rendering even the humble Black Mts inaccessible.

And we never questioned that these hills would always remain virtually unchanged for our enjoyment. Most of them had long been protected within the Snowdonia and Brecon Beacons National Parks - indeed all those above 2500' except inexplicably our favourite Berwyns. With rare exceptions such as the plonking of Trawsfynydd nuclear power station in the humdrum wastes south of Ffestiniog, we came and went untroubled by any threats to their sanctity - though we did regard Snowdon itself as a bit of a joke, what with the vast café (which we pronounced cafe) on top.

For all the years that Scotland didn't have National Parks, and suffered endless attritions large and small, my comparator for good management of precious landscapes was the Lake

District. Here I could return to haunts of youth with every confidence that they would be no further desecrated - no more reservoirs, no more forests, no road improvements after the horrors of the A66 and the absurdity of Dunmail Raise. For me the acme of appropriate care in the public domain is the road from Penrith to Ambleside, jinking timelessly along Ullswater and over Kirkstone Pass; the benchmark of upland changelessness is the enduring utility of Wainwright's Guides.

So when the chance finally came along to revisit Wales this Easter after 35 years absence, it never occurred to me to expect anything less. The only major insult I knew of within Snowdonia during that time was the sacrifice of the hallowed approach to my first Welsh 'munro', shapely Elidir Fawr and the Marchlyns, to the Dinorwic pumped storage scheme. Of course, wind farms have been proliferating on the mid-Wales moors to the extent that on a clear-day flight down to Bristol they dominate the view for half the length of the country, but they are outside the mountain cores.

Starting at Aberystwyth and working north to Bethesda, via Machynlleth and Dolgellau and Porthmadog, the manifest failure of the Park to protect this magnificent scenic heritage at every other step distressed me to the point of composing a letter to its Chief Officer as I walked - not a happy return. Of course one doesn't waste one's time actually penning and mailing such green-ink missives, as the system is designed to ignore general diatribes from visitors (they can barely respond to specific complaints). But since the Editor has chapped my door again, here is an Open Letter to the National Park Authority, endorsements and amplifications welcome.

Incessant afforestation

There is a place for large forests in North Wales, just as in Scotland, and longstanding ones such as Gwydyr on the lower ground around Betws-y-coed are considerable public assets comparable to the Trossachs. But at too many turns I was affronted by new afforestation with harsh edges pushing up much too high - such as a fat finger reaching up over 630m behind Braich-du, the western bastion of the great Cadair Idris range. Even more offensive is the filling of valley heads and cwms right to their rims, spiking over bold skylines - as in the grand 670m plateau between Cross Foxes and Dinas Mawddwy, deeply bitten into by cwm-scoops with sharp rims and crests. Worst of all is where forests are planted right up to the boundary fence making a mockery of several long ridge walks on both sides of Corris. These are crass transgressions of basic design principles, perpetuated by the Forestry Commission both on its own land and via grants to private investors, unchecked by an ineffective or politically hamstrung National Park Authority, and inadequately resisted by all the amenity bodies.

These may be lesser hills, but the effects are conspicuous from their greater neighbours, and they would if untarnished be becoming popular with less ambitious walkers; in the Lake District, Catbells and Loughrigg are as cherished as the Pikes. Even in prime mountain country, opposite Snowdon itself, the shapely Corbett of Moel Hebog and the lovely Nantlle ridge have long been infested with forestry pressing too far up their cwms and swamping several old paths across the watershed that links them - no signs of retreat since my 1959 1" map. There may be no vast new forests in the high mountain core, but it is saddening to see a new tongue of zig-zag-roaded forest hemming in the Aber Falls on the NW flank of the Carneddau, where I was once encouraged to help wear out one of the best scree runs in the country; especially since it rises to 500m hard against the National Trust estate boundary, and blots out the trough-side below the falls, the floor of which is an NNR.

Then there is unplanned afforestation. The NE end of Cadair Idris is a sweep of ancient upland, which breaks off abruptly in the great 300m crags of Graig Gau. Beneath them, a tract of sheepwalk has been taken out of grazing, presumably in pursuit of conservation in a

National Nature Reserve. It is now speckled with seedling conifers - two intervening ridges away from the nearest plantation.



Looking from Moelwyn Mawr across to Cnicht with Snowdon and the Glyders behind - bike tracks proliferate across the slopes on the right and reach the north summit of Cnicht *Photo:David Jarman*

Rhododendron

Swathes of Snowdonia have disappeared under the rhodie, wherever some Victorian built a country retreat, and thus most notably around the lovely sheltered low-lying traeths between Porthmadog and Harlech. Half a century and more of National Park, and no sign of abatement - abandon hope, all ye that love Loch Lomond and its oak-wooded neighbours. I only came upon one control operation, in an out-of-the way fringe of the Park by Llanymawddwy, where the blasted hillside stood out against traditional slopes of grass and bracken and nibbled heather - within which a thousand more seedling rhodies lurked.

Here I was a bit stunned to read a letter in the Guardian from the president of The Rhododendron Society asserting that the rhodie was a native of Iberia, had once been native in Britain, and should be welcomed back along with global warming. Am I being too species-ist here ? Remembering a recent foray down Loch Goil to Carrick Castle, I think not.

Power lines

There have long been transmission lines around the fringes of Snowdonia, what with nuclear at Wylfa, pumped storage at Ffestiniog, hydro at Dolgarrog. As in the Highlands. But it still came as a shock to see how brutally they impact on the Carneddau, crossing their north end well within the Park over 400m up, dominating views of them and out from them. My new map shows three lines in close parallel for much of this stretch, and indeed the special place where the bare mountains come down to the sea looks more like the environs of Merseyside or Kincardine Bridge.

This leaves me in little doubt as to the enormity of the Beauy-Denny proposal, where it crosses open uplands. We have to wean ourselves eventually from dependence on a supergrid, and from treating our most scenic landscapes as if they were industrial zones when it comes to power sources.

Back at the very heart of Snowdon, in its stupendous east cwm, I had forgotten that Llyn Llydaw was dammed for hydro. The pipeline down the mountainside is singularly visible to this day, and would never be permitted now - so has no-one in the Park ever thought to grow

native woodland around it in all these years ? There's a wee challenge for the Nevis Partnership...

Bulldozed tracks

One of my goals was 586m Graig Goch, a mere moorland, but a grandstand for the south side of Cadair, and the rim of the biggest ancient landslide in Britain, which dams Llyn Tal-y-llyn. My old 1" shows no tracks on it; my new 2½" shows a track from the Corris col up to the half-way shelf, not too offensive, quite handy even; my visit finds it freshly extended right up along the ridge and almost to the top. From which can be seen a network of new tracks all over the open hillsides on the SW flank of Cadair itself.

And a few days later, crossing from Bala over the highest road pass in Wales to descend for the first time into the magical trough-head of the Dyfi, its innermost sylvan stretch before it curves up west to its source beneath the great escarpment of the Arans, I find the magic wasted by half-a-dozen new bulldozed scars zigzagging nakedly up the steep, open walls. Who funds these things ? They are not for forestry, nor for sport; if simply to make shepherding more efficient, is this really a priority any more, or is it some entrenched bureaucracy keeping itself in its accustomed business ? Does the National Park have no powers or policies to prevent them, or (as we suspect in the Cairngorms) is the voice of the landowner still predominant ?

Bike tracks

This was not the misty moisty Wales that I remembered - bone dry after weeks of drought, some days of thick haze (obscuring the windfarms lurking around the southern fringes of the Park), some of exceptional clarity. On the very best day, unbroken sunshine from Dolgellau dawn to Criccieth dusk, I returned to Cwm Croesor, where once on a school bus trip to invisible hills I had peeked into the phone box to find the Welsh for 'ambulance' was 'ambiwllans'. Today my researches required a circuit of the valley, ascending Moelwyn Mawr from the old quarry to confirm my hunch that a great rockslide has sharpened its crest, and then circling round over Cnicht to photo the ensemble in westering sun. Perfect, except for having to give my unfamiliar digicamera battery heat therapy to tease the killer picture out of it.

Imperfect, because all the pleasant grassy rakes between the crag-bands above the valley-head were combed with scramble-bike tracks, which found their devious ways onto the broad north ridge. Now Cnicht (2265') is affectionately tagged the 'Matterhorn of Wales'. We had once scrambled up it in wind and rain; this evening it was to savour. I settled down just by the north top, most of the 14 Snowdon munros silhouetted, Cardigan Bay curling out to Llyn, the Harlechs and wilder Wales spreading inland. And was joined by two bikers doing their ascents and jumps over the outcrops.

This was not just an isolated instance, it is evidently an abuse which has been running for a long time, and is most likely local lads who know the slate quarry roads up from Blaenau. Unlike my other regrets, it is not a land use or development issue but an access management one. It is what National Park ranger services are for. I am not trying to ban scramble biking, but there is abundant scope for it in this quarried moonscape without committing such sacrilege. I would be surprised to find it happening unchecked on favourite Lake District crests, or along Stanage Edge or Mam Tor in the Peak.

Wales -v- Scotland -v- England

I come away from Wales with an impression - possibly ill-founded - that almost 60 years of National Park have protected Snowdonia no better than 60 years without National Parks have ravaged the Highlands. Will we say the same about our new National Park areas? If my

hunch is right that the Lakes and Peak have been much better safeguarded, what does this suggest? Maybe the cultures of North Wales and the Highlands are rather similar, with a bitter resistance to controls imposed from distant cities, and a more deeply-seated attitude to the exploitation of the land for traditional employment and economic gain. Maybe having a high proportion of the Lakes and Peak in National Trust and other 'public' ownerships has fostered a more protective and managerial attitude there. Maybe the Peak is run primarily for the benefit of the adjacent city populations, and the Lakes are run primarily for tourism.

My revisit to Wales found the essential magnificence of its peaks undiminished, and some changes for the better - last time we had to sneak up the Nantlle ridge, hasten along it, and get off before the infamous farmer could give us a blasting, this time it is all Access Land and enjoyed by scores. But its sense of wildness is everywhere lessened by the same attrition and neglect as my Beauy-Denny evidence charts for the Highlands [see website].

Glancing at my new map to check the environs of Rhobell Fawr, I see any attempt to repeat our wildest walk out to the remote rampart of Dduallt would be impossible, for the interminable intervening bogs are now productively afforested from end to end, much to my father's relief no doubt.

Editor's note: Are we expecting too much of our National Parks or do these impressions chime with our readers' experiences? We should be particularly interested to hear from those who regularly visit Snowdonia and the other National Parks mentioned here.

NB. REPLY LETTER FROM SNOWDONIA PARK AUTHORITY IN WLN 70

South Uist Buy-out

Article

Danny Rafferty reports on the successful community purchase



South Uist's two highest hills, Hecla and Beinn Mhor, seen from the west.

Photo: John Rankin

On November the 30th 2006 South Uist Estates went into community ownership. The celebration ceilidh was, I thought, a curiously muted affair which might have had something to do with the weather that day - horrendous. The estate itself comprises all of South Uist, the island of Eriskay and half of Benbecula, over 90,000 acres, which is one of the largest landholdings in the United Kingdom. With over 900 crofts it is the largest crofting estate in the country.

For those who do not know South Uist it is geographically separate from Eriskay and Benbecula but linked by causeways. Over 20 miles from north to south it is 4 to 5 miles across. The west is basically flat with machair lands where fodder crops such as oats and rye are grown in the summer. Through the spine of the island is a range of hills rising to Ben More just above 2,000 feet. The east is steeper and generally much more rugged with waist-

high heather and hidden steep-sided streams ready to waylay the unwary walker. Today most people live on the west side of Uist and that is where the main road and most of the facilities are. However there is plenty of evidence of human settlement on the east side from prehistoric souterrains and wheelhouses to the remains of villages cleared from the 18th century onwards and others that were abandoned early in the twentieth. The climate as you would expect is wet and windy, evidenced by the many lochs and streams. Unfortunately the watery ambience does not at times extend to the actual houses: we have no water as I write this, the price sometimes paid for a spell of good weather, a rise in the water table and a shifting of the pipes.

The estate has been run as a traditional sporting estate and was owned, I believe, by a syndicate of nine families. They ran the estate with a fairly light touch but did not actively promote development. The Land Reform Act passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2003 effectively devalued crofting estates in material terms by giving crofters the right-to-buy the entire estate - with or without the agreement of the owners. Inspired thereafter with a mixture of altruism and financial acumen the owners were minded to sell, began to speak to a local group and the buyout was completed last year with support from the Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Lottery, SNH, the local council and a loan from the Royal Bank of Scotland. Now that the estate is in community ownership let us now turn to the problems that the people of the island have to address.

The most visible indicator of fundamental social and economic decline is the skewed demographic: there has been an overall 17.5% decline in the population in the last 20 years; the age-profile is heavily weighted to the older age groups and there is a gender imbalance with more men than women. The main development proposals at the moment are: to create a marina in Lochboisdale; small-scale renewable energy schemes - no AMEC monsters here please - build affordable housing; improve the golf course at Askernish; attend to much needed drainage on the low ground, and institute a range of coastal protection measures.

As the pattern of settlement in Uist is very scattered the centrifugal tendency has traditionally been strong in community affairs with local loyalties much in evidence. This has militated against presenting a united front on important issues and has disadvantaged the island in the past. The very democratic and inclusive structure of the community company, Stòras Uibhist - the qualification for becoming a shareholder is proof of residency and one pound - should promote solutions that have popular support, respect the environmental assets of the island and are progressive. South Uist is by far the largest land area in Scotland taken into community ownership presenting huge challenges to those steering affairs and to the population as a whole. The potential benefits are, however, commensurately large. I know that SWLG members will wish us well in this enterprise and I will periodically update WLN readers with developments and progress.

A scoping meeting took place in April to prepare for a major forest restructuring project on the slopes of Ptarmigan Hill on the east side of Loch Lomond. Forestry Commission Scotland (Cowal & Trossachs District) invited a wide range of interested parties to discuss proposals for converting the coniferous forest to native woodland. The conifers were planted in the 1960s, generally above the existing oakwoods beside the loch shore, but for many years they have been a conspicuous and unnatural feature of the view across the loch. Their removal and the conversion to native woodland was one of the main objectives when the Ben Lomond National Memorial Park was designated in 1997, five years before the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park was established.

The project presents a number of challenges. The vulnerability of the steep slopes to landslide will have to be taken into consideration in the felling schedule, with potentially some conifers being left in place until a thicket of native woodland is established to stabilize the ground. The sheer volume of timber - 100,000 tonnes, approximating to 4000 lorry loads - will involve new roads and upgrading of existing ones. The possibility taking the timber out by barge on Loch Lomond was also discussed.

Another important factor will be the presence of the West Highland Way, which follows the main forest road for several miles north of Rowardennan. It would be unsafe to allow unmanaged access along here while timber extraction is taking place, but the Way is a major tourism asset and needs to be kept open. A number of options were considered, one of which is to use a boat to ferry walkers past the area where felling is taking place. Another is to upgrade the little-used alternative route through the oakwoods well below the coniferous plantation. The eventual outcome will almost certainly be far better for walkers as the views from the forest road are currently much restricted by the dense conifers.

Many other issues, such as the impact on water quality, wildlife and archaeology will have to be taken into account. Forestry Commission policy has moved forward considerably since the 1960s when the the main driver was to create a strategic timber reserve following the Second World War. The foresters who created the woodland probably never realized what a demanding challenge they would be giving their successors to fell the timber.

John Digney



The hard edge of the conifer plantation is conspicuous in the view across Loch Lomond.

Photo: John Digney

John Digney reports on a controversial proposal

A proposal for a small-scale windfarm near Lochinver has caused divisions in the local community. The Assynt Foundation, established in 2005 to secure the community buyout of the Glencanisp and Drumrunie estates under the provisions of the Land Reform Act, held an open day followed by an evening public meeting on 28th March at which it was decided to take the plan forward to the next stage.

The proposal for a 5MW scheme is only in its very early stages, but would probably involve either three turbines of 1.65 MW each or six turbines of 0.85MW, sited on a ridge above Glencanisp Lodge. The Lodge is 2km east of Lochinver and is on one of the two main approach routes to the iconic peak of Suilven, a further 5km inland. The turbines would presumably be conspicuous on the walk-in and easily visible from the summits of both Suilven and Canisp and from numerous other viewpoints.

The £4.5m scheme would be community-owned and produce an estimated net income of £300,000, but the community is far from united in its support for the proposals and many people are unhappy about the way the initial consultation process has been handled. According to the Northern Times, Sutherland's weekly newspaper, several local business owners are opposed to the development in such a sensitive location, fearing the adverse impact on tourism, and have discovered that many of their regular customers were unaware of the meeting. Only about 60 people attended the meeting, which was held on the same night as the televised Italy v Scotland European Cup qualifying match.

The organisers have been accused of inadequate publicity for the meeting and of gauging opinion by requesting a simple show of hands from objectors rather than a formal ballot. Not surprisingly in such circumstances, no-one raised a hand, but apparently the organisers apologised for having done it that way on the grounds of "nerves". During the open day a sealed box had actually been provided for written comments, with 24 people agreeing to moving on to the next stage and 14 opposed to any development of the kind proposed. However, the Foundation stress that these are early days and that any proposal will only go ahead with the support of the substantial majority of the community based on an independently-run secret ballot, with full information made available.

Ironically, the newspaper report noted that that at workshop sessions prior to the purchase two years ago, it had emerged that a windfarm was one development the community certainly didn't want. We in SWLG would endorse that view. This is an ancient and unspoilt landscape deservedly designated as a National Scenic Area, and a glance at the map shows how it has largely escaped recent intrusions such as commercial forestry, bulldozed tracks etc. The Assynt Foundation's own website speaks of "44,500 acres of stunningly beautiful natural land" and "an awe-inspiring, wildlife-rich world of lochans, rivers and hills", and makes much of the spectacular setting of Glencanisp Lodge which is now being marketed for holiday accommodation amid stunning scenery. It is hard to see how even a small windfarm can be integrated discretely into this.

The estates were purchased for £2.9m in 2005 largely out of public money, the largest contribution coming from the Scottish Land Fund, and part of the obligation on the Foundation is to provide economic benefit to the community. However, it would be a perverse turn of events if after only two years of community ownership the area were to find itself under threat from the kind of development that is so controversial in the Highlands and Islands. We must hope the community will nip this one in the bud.

Ben Nevis violated

A bit of the wild place that is Ben Nevis has been raped. Not a bit owned by the JMT [*John Muir Trust*], I should add, but a bit right on JMT's boundary. A NEW PATH has been constructed, nearly two metres wide and approx 500m long, from the sharp bend (alt about 600m) on the normal tourist route to the outflow of the Half-way Lochan on an otherwise trackless part of the mountain. There never has been a path here, none is marked on the OS 1:50,000 map, nor on the old one inch. My notion of hill pathwork is to control erosion and restore landscape, not facilitate access. There was no erosion here. This path goes absolutely nowhere that anybody normally goes and ends abruptly at the outflow burn.

I have been going on Ben Nevis since 1959 on a fairly regular basis. A day on the Ben is a 'big' day, especially on the north east side, which this path geologically is. Ben Nevis can provide adventurous climbing and mountaineering, summer and winter, from sea level to summit unparalleled in the UK - challenging, physically demanding, with a sense of remoteness, grandeur, remoteness, scale, and a sense of achievement afterwards. The violation rapes the idea of the ultimate in British mountaineering.

I am convinced this (unfinished?) path is part of a longer project to extend a path network for the commercial interests in Fort William (broadly speaking, tourism), and should be resisted, even removed, at the insistence of all who value the iconic status of Ben Nevis and what it means to mountaineers nationally and internationally.

John Allen by email

AGM 2007**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
1 September 2007**

The Annual General Meeting of the Group will be held on Saturday 1 September at 7.30pm at the [Covenanter's Inn](#), Aberfoyle.

Walk in the Trossachs:

Meet at 10.30am at the Woodland Trust's Glen Finglas car park (Grid ref NN 546 065) on the north side of the A821 about 1km east of Brig o' Turk and about 10km west of Callander. Do not confuse with the Woodland Trust's Little Drum Wood car park which is about 500m further east and on the south side of the road.

There is a range of walk options from this car park - some interest en route as the main path goes through the newly planted broadleaves, and further up the glens there are prime examples of ancient pasture woodland that the Trust are protecting. Also some antiscarps on Ben Vane that David will no doubt point out to Tim!

AGM:

The evening will be spent at the Covenanter's Inn, Aberfoyle, where there will be a short AGM at 7.30pm followed by informal discussion. Beforehand we shall be having a bar meal in the hotel lounge bar from 6pm onwards.

Please inform the group co-ordinator if you intend to come to get rough numbers.