

# WILD LAND NEWS 71

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## COMMENT - Windfarm Expansion

We are now perhaps seeing the second phase of the spread of windfarms, especially in the Highlands. The first phase has been characterised by individual windfarms gaining permission in specific locations - these possibly not the first choice of the generating companies.

The current, second phase is the establishment of further windfarms in the vicinity of these initial farms, and expansion of the original ones. This phase is also seeing an increase in the height of turbines as well as the expansion in number.

There are several examples that come to mind: just north and east of the Cairngorms National Park is the area for several proposed and planned farms round Dava Moor and Lochindorb, described as a Ring of Steel, around the top of the Park, not a huge distance from the windfarm at Farr in the Monadhliaths. The campaign group 'Save our Dava' has more information.

In the Lammermuir Hills, south-east of the Lothians, there are the existing farms at Crystal Rig Phase 1, Black Hill and Dun Law. Approved are Crystal Rig 2, Dun Law 2, Aikengall, Toddleburn and Longpark. Applied for is Crystal Rig 2a and Fallago Rig.

It is clear from this pattern that once one windfarm is approved in a locality it is much harder to resist other farms and the expansion of the original one.

Again and again the lack of a national strategy means our wild land is being eroded continually bit by bit, application by application. The quantity of proposals is daunting...the details to analyse, huge. By and large the public is unaware of what has been approved already, yet it is public money that is being thrown at these projects.

The Government's Renewables Obligation provides financial incentives to suppliers, but in 2005 the National Audit Office calculated that "Pursuit of the target will result in costs for the consumer and taxpayer exceeding £1 billion a year by the end of the decade, which will increase the price of electricity by around 5 per cent." They also noted that "some projects using the cheapest technologies (onshore wind and landfill gas) at the best sites receive more support from the Renewables Obligation than necessary to see them developed."

So where has the surplus money been going? Into the pockets of landowners for a start. The going rate for rent is now understood to be over £10,000 per turbine per annum. Our society has almost become inured to the idea of landowners making easy profits out of monopoly rights to natural resources and out of the investment of public money, but windfarms add another dimension to this. It is outrageous that private fortunes can be made out of the way the wind blows over the hills, driven by weather systems originating thousands of miles away over which no-one has control, especially when it is all so obviously happening at the expense of the taxpayer.

The Ministry of Defence has objected to 13 windfarms across Scotland as well as 29 in England. Most of the concerns are in connection either with interference with low flying exercises or with air-traffic control. Radar screens have been found to confuse the rotating blades of the turbines with aircraft propeller blades, and at a site in Wales an extensive "zone of invisibility" was created. In one case the MoD fears that the vibration from the turbine blades might interfere with the sensors at the Eskdalemuir seismological reporting station which is one of a global chain to detect nuclear explosions anywhere across the globe.

There is a certain irony for SWLG to find the MoD as an ally in blocking unwanted developments in wild places in Scotland. Before now we have commented on the unwelcome intrusion of low-flying aircraft, and it was the proposed purchase of Knoydart for military training purposes that prompted the formation of the Group in 1982.

*In the second extract from his new book, **Robert Macfarlane** describes a winter's night spent alone on Scotland's most northerly Munro*

I had been told that if you climb Ben Hope on the summer solstice, and spend a clear night on its summit, you will never lose sight of the sun. The combination of elevation and northerliness means that the uppermost rim of the sun never dips fully below the horizon. A truly white night. In the autumn, too, it was said to be a fine place for watching the aurora borealis, which shimmered like aerial phosphorescence, green and red. But I was most drawn to Hope in its winter moods. For several years I had wanted to climb it when snow was on the ground, and spend a cold night on its summit: the sense of polar space opening out beyond me, the scents of berg and frazil washing down off the invisible Arctic Ocean.

Hope is a mountain which holds the solstitial opposites of north: it knows both the affirmation of the never-vanishing sun and the indifference of the eighteen-hour night. There could be, I thought, no other place in Britain or Ireland where you could better feel a sense of 'bigness outside yourself', in Stegner's phrase. That 'bigness' had been there on Rannoch Moor and at Sandwood, and I had felt a chronic version of it in Coruisk. But I wondered if, once I began to move south, it would fall away, become unlocatable.

I drove through sleet, then sunshine, then squalls, with raindrops the size of berries pelting on to the windscreen. No weather system remained dominant for more than an hour. By early afternoon I was at Hope's south-western foot. Clouds bearing cargoes of snow pushed past to the north-east. Snow was falling lightly over Foinaven, to the west across moor. The sky above me was clear, a pale winter white. I looked up at Hope, remembering its shape from the maps I had studied.

I started up Hope as the day's light began to dim, feeling excited, almost jaunty, to be out there alone. Following a stream-cut, I passed big boulders worked by the water into curious shapes. As I climbed, the view over the surrounding landscape opened. Hundreds of empty miles of watery land radiating out in each direction, big peaks here and there - Klibreck, Loyal, holding snow in their eastern corrie - and Loch Hope leading the eye north, past the mountain's cliff ramparts, and out to the spaciousness of the Firth.

Hope did not give itself up easily. The ascent was nearly from sea level, and the huge summit cone, crag-bound, was steadily steep. By the time I reached the top, the air around me was dark and gritty, and the wind colder. The summit was bare, stripped by gales and frost weathering. Rime ice had formed in feathery windrows on shattered grey rocks, which were

also marked with lichens the colour of lime and tangerine. Between the rocks, snow lay in stripes and furrows, dry and granular as sand. Working quickly, with numbing hands, and a growing sense of worry - was this too cold a place, too hard a place, to spend the night? - I moved rocks to clear a lozenge-shaped space of rough flatness, and arranged them into a low curving wall, a foot or so high.

That night the winds began a slow swing from west to north, bringing snow showers scattering against the canvas of my bivouac bag, and raking the summit rocks with hail. A moon was up there somewhere, breaking through the cloud cover. It was far too cold to sleep. I lay like a compass needle, head to the north, on my front, looking towards the sea, watching patches of silver open and close over the distant waters, trying to keep warm.

At two o'clock, still sleepless, I left the shelter, crossed back to the main top, and began to pace out the reach of the mountain's curving summit plateau. The cloud cover had thinned. Moonlight came and went in squalls. Each rock wore a carapace of ice, which cracked and skittered off in shards at the slightest contact. Little hail drifts had built up in the lee of the rocks; otherwise the wind had stripped away all the unfrozen snow. The air smelt bright.

I walked out to where the mountain's eastern ridge began, and from there looked down into the lost lochs, which were holding moonlight like snow. Moving across to the south-western tip of the plateau, I sensed more than saw the massive complex of Foinaven miles away, its snow-shires flashing silver, the rest of its black bulk invisible in the dark. The cold was pressing, constant, and I began to shiver; not a surface tremble, but a deep convulsive shaking. In that deep winter darkness, my sunny East Anglian beechwood felt suddenly hugely distant, the landscape of another continent or era, not just another country.

This was one of the least accommodating places to which I had ever come. The sea, the stone, the night and the weather all pursued their processes and kept their habits, as they had done for millennia, and would do for millennia to follow. The fall of moonlight on to water, the lateral motion of blown snow through air, these were of the place's making only. This was a terrain that had been thrown up by fire and survived ice. There was nothing, save the wall of rocks I had made and the summit cairn, to suggest history. Nothing human, only the mineral marks of fossils and glaciers. I turned east and south, straining to see if there was any flicker of light in the hundreds of miles of darkness around me. Even a glimpse of something lit, however distant and unreachable, would have been reassurance of a sort. Nothing. No glimmer.

There could have been nowhere that conformed more purely to the vision of wildness with which I had begun my journeys. I had been drawn here by a spatial logic, a desire to reach this coincident point of high altitude and high latitude. But now I could not wait to leave it. It was an amplified version of the discomfort I had unexpectedly felt at the Inaccessible Pinnacle in Coruisk.

If I could have safely descended from the summit of Hope in the darkness, I would have done so. The comfortless snow-shires, the frozen rocks: this place was not hostile to my presence, far from it. Just entirely, gradelessly indifferent. Up there, I felt no companionship with the land, no epiphany of relation like that I had experienced in the Black Wood. Here, there was no question of relation. This place refused any imputation of meaning.

All travellers to wild places will have felt some version of this, a brief blazing perception of the world's disinterest. In small measures it exhilarates. But in full form it annihilates. Nan Shepherd found this out on the Cairngorm plateau, another bare, stripped, Arctic zone. 'Like all profound mysteries, it is so simple that it frightens me,' she had written of the water that rises on the plateau. 'The water wells from the rock, and flows away. For unnumbered years it has welled from the rock, and flowed away. It does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself. One cannot know the rivers till one has seen them at their sources; but this journey is

not to be undertaken lightly. One walks among elementals, and elementals are not governable.'

At some point, the winds dropped, and the temperature rose by a degree or two. I returned to the shallow stone shelter and was able at last to sleep, for perhaps two hours, little more, longing for dawn and escape from the summit. When I woke at first light, cold to the core, the air was windless. My rucksack was frozen, the canvas rigid and pale as though it had been fired in a kiln. I found and kept a fragment of quartz granulite, irregular in its shape: sharp-edged, frost-shattered. Then I set off down the mountain, and it seemed as I did so that descent in any direction from that summit would be a voyage south.

Robert MacFarlane's book "The Wild Places" was launched at last year's Edinburgh Book Festival. ISBN: 978-1-86207-941-0. Publisher: Granta. RRP: £18.99 We are grateful to the author and publisher for permission to reproduce this extract.

## An experimental toilet for Corroul bothy

Article

by *John Cant*

**There is a long history of shelters and bothies in the Cairngorms. However, in the latter part of the 20th Century many were removed, mostly on safety grounds, especially after the 1971 Curran disaster when 5 school children and a trainee instructor died trying to reach the Curran refuge on the plateau.**

**The Corroul hut in the Lairig Ghru remains; however, like many bothies, it faces the health hazards arising from the need by humans to answer nature's call. The Mountain Bothies Association, who maintain the Corroul bothy, are exploring an interesting new approach to dealing with this issue. MBA member, John Cant, explains further:**



Corroul Hut, Lairig Ghru with the toilet in construction.

*Photo: John Cant*

Toilets at bothies are not unheard of - Ruighaiteachain in Glen Feshie has had a flush toilet and septic tank in place for years, Bob Scott's beautifully renovated bothy at Derry lodge has a septic tank, and the Linn of Dee car park has two composting toilets.

When it came to installing a toilet at Corroul, we initially thought it would just be a case of choosing the best technology for the job. Water flush toilets and septic tanks are well known, but they depend on having a supply of water, ease of access to install and empty the septic tank if necessary, and ground conditions to permit digging a big hole to take the tank.

Composting toilets are arguably the best technology for treating human excreta in all circumstances. Instead of polluting and wasting valuable water supplies by using water as a transport mechanism, the contributions are composted on-site and the proceeds are returned to the environment as a valuable manure.

A composting toilet works by having visitors add a handful of soak after each use, the soak being an absorbent carbon-rich material like sawdust or peat. The soak covers the contributions and keeps the pile aerated, reducing smells, and balancing the high nitrogen content of urine, making for a perfect mix that will compost itself, given half a chance.

The best-known composting toilet - the Clivus Multrum - is built as a vault with a sloping floor and a capacity about three times the volume of the yearly contributions. The contributions slide gently down the floor towards the exit, mouldering away in the process. If everything works perfectly the vault never has to be dug out.

A more basic possibility is the VIP toilet - the Ventilation Improved Privy : a hole in the ground with a seat on top and a vent pipe. When the hole is full, it is sealed and another one dug elsewhere.

For Corroul we quickly ruled out a flush toilet. We would never get a septic tank safely installed in the unremitting bog, and we couldn't rely on a supply of water in the depths of winter. We also had to rule out a composting toilet due to the need for a soak material and the size of the required construction.

Another of our design criteria was to build the smallest practical toilet so as to avoid adding another structure to the glen and so minimise the environmental impact. The bothy being built on bedrock meant that a vault constructed above ground level would end up dwarfing the bothy itself.

All that remained from our options, then, was the VIP. We weren't, however, terribly happy with this either - again, digging holes in bogs or bedrock is not easy, we didn't like the idea of another structure, nor did we like the idea of holes full of mouldering excrement.

The most significant design problem was unavoidable - people. People are used to public toilets being kept clean by paid staff. If something goes wrong and someone makes a mess, it is someone else's responsibility to clean it up. At an unstaffed bothy like Corroul, it is unfortunately all too easy to make a mess and walk away leaving the mess behind. Any sort of toilet is also likely to become a receptacle for rubbish of all sorts - biodegradable or not.

A bit of research came up with a sales brochure that suggested a possible solution to some of the difficulties : a geotextile bag. This works like a mini septic tank - the bag receives the contributions and its woven structure allows the liquid to pass through while retaining the solids. A bag could be slung below a toilet seat and detached, dried and stored whenever full, and the drainage could be run out to a small soak-away. Would this work if installed in a simple structure attached in the lee of the bothy? We didn't know, but thought it worthwhile to trial this system over a year to see what happens and how bothy visitors react to it.

The geotextile bag idea is actually rather complicated - according to the brochure, liquidised effluent needs a flocculating agent added to it to help the solids precipitate. We wouldn't be using water, but would the bags dry out anyway? We set up a simple trial using tins of sweet corn and baked beans -standard bothy fare - and watched these de-water to a dry mass in a few days.

What we proposed, then, to the National Trust Mar Lodge Estate and the Cairngorm National Park Authority was that the MBA add a simple structure to the south of Corrou bothy which would house an experimental toilet using the geo-textile de-watering bag system. A standard pedestal seat would be mounted on a raised floor and a bag attached underneath. When full, the bag would be left to de-water, and the pedestal moved to be positioned above a second bag.

When the second bag was full, the first would be detached and stored in a secure structure and a new bag fitted. The stored bags would be left to decompose over time and when safe, either buried in a suitable location or removed from the site.

After a lot of discussion between all concerned, applying for planning permission, and negotiating over health and safety issues, this proposal was accepted. Scotland Unlimited also gave a grant to support a maintenance programme that would monitor the toilet over a year's use. The maintenance would be undertaken by MBA personnel, who would monitor the toilet, change over the bags when necessary, and take samples for analysis.

Returning to the greatest challenge - people using the bothy - we have faith that visitors will recognise the work that has been invested in improving Corrou and will take responsibility themselves for its maintenance.

All of the work, reconstruction, and negotiations to date have been done entirely on a voluntary basis through the wish for Corrou to continue as a shelter for those who love wild and lonely places. If visitors are not able to rise to the challenge of looking after what is in fact their bothy, there is a high risk that the bothy will have to be demolished and removed, as have other shelters in the Cairngorms.

We ask all who visit Corrou take special care to look after what has been provided for them. This means not only making sure that any personal mess and rubbish are cleared up and removed from the site, but also any mess left by others is also cleaned up and removed. The toilet is not designed to take anything other than human excreta and toilet paper. Men are advised to urinate outside, well away from the bothy, to keep the liquid entering the toilet to a minimum. All rubbish, tins, bottles, food of whatever kind should be removed from the bothy and in no circumstances put down the toilet.

If there are serious problems that cannot be resolved, please contact the MBA at [www.mountainbothies.org.uk](http://www.mountainbothies.org.uk), or leave a message (excuse the pun - ed.) or feedback at [www.compostloos.org.uk](http://www.compostloos.org.uk), a website dedicated to the Corrou project.



Corrou Toilet Guts. This is the custom steel body with vent pipe to which the de-watering bag is attached.

*Photo: John Cant*

## Snowie Case Dismissed

*Article*

Following the disappointment of the Ann Gloag access case ([WLN 70](#)), a Stirling Sheriff has upheld the decision by Stirling Council, supported by the Ramblers' Association, to require Euan Snowie to allow public access to his Boquhan Estate near Kippen under the Land Reform legislation of 2003. Mr. Snowie, whose waste-disposal firm became almost a household name during the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak, had kept a gate locked since 2005 to exclude the public from some 40 acres around his house.

Sheriff Andrew Cubie dismissed as "wholly unreliable" the evidence of an expert witness, Joseph Holden, a former superintendent with Central Scotland Police who had supported Mr. Snowie's case on the grounds of security. Some 13 acres will remain out of bounds to the public, but these comprise gardens, lawns, tennis courts, fishponds, stables and a show-jumping arena in the vicinity of the house itself.

Although this is certainly not wild land, the judgment is welcome as it helps to clarify the extent to which occupants of houses with extensive grounds can deny access to land. The contentious west gate is about half a mile from the house and provides access to popular recreational walking routes.

## COMMENT - Windfarm Expansion

*Article*

The Scottish Government has rejected proposals for Europe's largest windfarm on the Isle of Lewis. The development would have run almost continuously for about 70km. and would have been a dominant landscape feature across much of the northern half of the island. As well as 181 turbines, the scheme would have involved 88 miles of road, 137 pylons, several quarries and both overhead and underground cables. On the mainland an interconnector would have taken the power from Ullapool to Beaulay.

In January, the Government had indicated it was "minded to refuse" the scheme. Although there was some subsequent talk of reducing the scale of the project or building it in stages to minimise the impact, the Energy Minister, Jim Mather, announced the decision to refuse it in late April on the grounds of conflict with the EC Birds Directive and EC Habitats Directive that

apply to the Lewis Peatlands Special Protection Area. The Government had received almost 11,000 letters of objection to the proposals and less than 100 in support.

Although it is reassuring to see that conservation designations can be upheld in the face of enormous pressure from big business, we need to be realistic in our celebrations. Given the SNP's pro-renewables strategy, this decision was clearly an uncomfortable one for the Minister to have to make and has exposed the Government to derision from Opposition politicians. Supporters of the scheme have accused the Government of "overzealous" interpretation of the regulations, of denying the islands much-needed job opportunities and investment, and of jeopardising its target of generating 50% of Scotland's electricity from renewables by 2020. Jim Mather responded with assurances that the target will be met, and ominously, that this decision "does not mean there cannot be onshore windfarms in the Western Isles". He promised that by autumn there will be an action plan for sustainable development in the islands.

Landscape considerations did not figure specifically in this decision, and as current designations only give patchy protection to our landscapes, we must expect further threats to wild places as the Government presses ahead to achieve its target.