

The CNPA takes action at Drumochter – is it enough?

Description



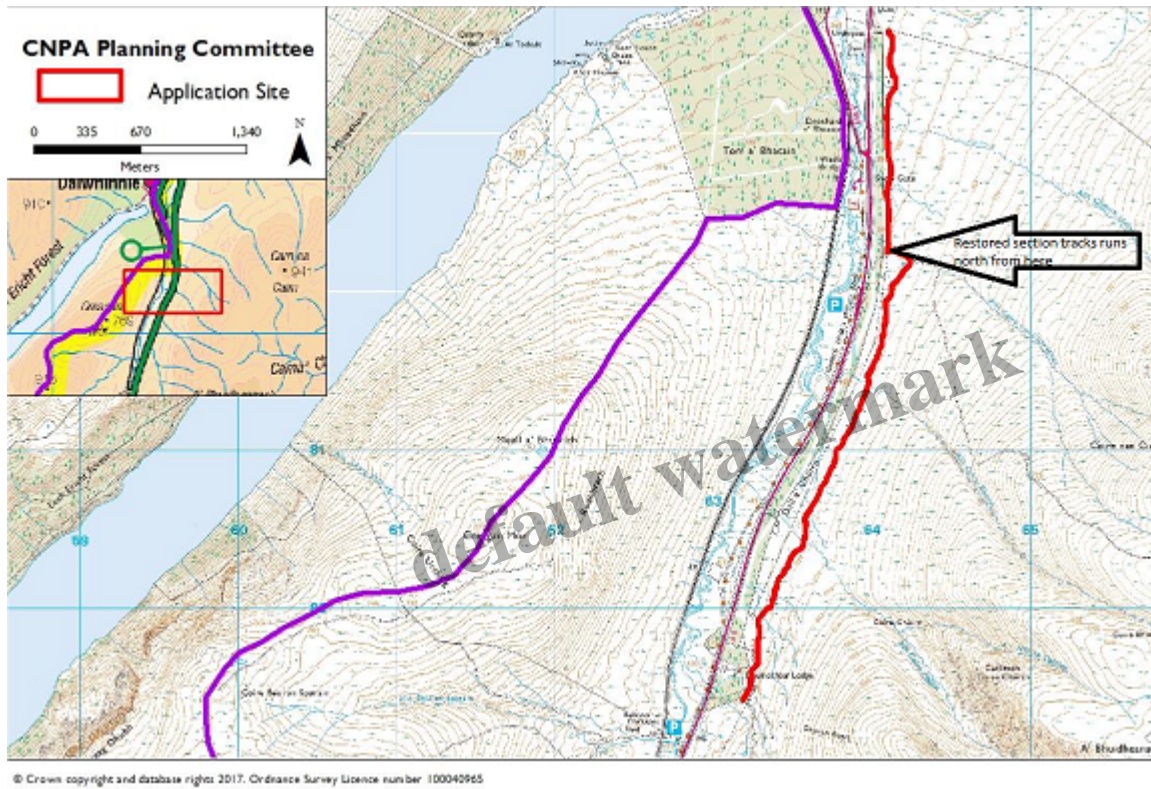
The Drumochter, a fine landscape forming a gateway between north and south, marred by development. A line of the “restored” Beaulieu Denny construction track is marked by the scar behind the pylons

Over the last year Parkswatch has featured a number of posts about the destruction of the landscape at Drumochter, including:

- the unrestored Beaulieu Denny construction track between Dalnaspidal and Drumochter ([see here](#));
- the failure of Scottish and Southern Electric to restore the ground at Drumochter as required by the Beaulieu Denny planning consent from the Scottish Government ([see here for example](#));

- progress on the restoration of the Beaully Denny construction track from just south of Drumochter Lodge to the end of the A9 shelter belt opposite Dalwhinnie ([see here](#))
- and, the continued proliferation of hill tracks and inappropriate use of All Terrain Vehicles around Drumochter ([see here for example](#)).

Two of these issues were considered by the Cairngorms National Park Planning Committee in December ([see here for papers](#)) and will be covered here. While welcoming the CNPA's continued interest in Drumochter and the actions taken, this post will argue they do not go far enough and suggest some alternative measures to restore and enhance the landscape and its wildlife.



In February 2015 the

CNPA gave consent to the North Drumochter Estate to retain a section of the Beaully Denny construction track outwith the Drumochter Hills Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area (above in red) on the condition that the track was narrowed and a belt of native trees was planted alongside it. The restoration, with the exception of the shelter belt was due to be completed by June 2016.



The start of the northern section of the Beauly Denny construction track (as indicated by arrow in map) it appeared in February 2016. Note the ridge of vegetation covered spoil running along the left side of

A year ago the restoration had not started but sometime between then and August 2017, when I next visited, the northern section of the track (above my arrow) was restored. The work was done by McGowan, who provided the specification for the track which was submitted to the Planning Committee, and has generally been completed to a high standard, much higher than is usual for hill tracks or for most of the Beauly Denny restoration work to date:



The northernmost end of the track. Note how the low angle of the embankment above the track has vegetation to recover quickly while stored turfs have been effectively used to restore the ground below the track. October 2017.



Before restoration, the track extended almost to the edge of the culvert. The bare banks on either side of the culvert appear to be the consequence of insufficient turf being stored for restoration purposes and are at high risk of erosion. October 2017.



Looking back down a line of new grouse butts – which appear to have been installed without the appropriate consents and have caused significant damage to vegetation – to the restored section of track which is to the right of the first pylon. The track is hardly detectable from this distance compared to the unrestored section to the left of the pylon. August 2017.

While generally McGowan has done a very good job, their ability to restore the track to the standards set out in the specification appears to have been affected by a number of factors. Throughout its length the section of restored track is broader than specified by the planning conditions:



While generally the sides of the track have been well restored in places there appears to have been vegetation to do this: here there is an unvegetated section of ground to the right of the track while the unnecessarily large passing place appears to be another solution to this lack of material (which was responsibility).

The reason for this appears to be that insufficient turves were stored for restoration purposes so that there wasn't enough material available to restore the track to the required width. I don't think matters too much here because the track is hidden from a distance and because of the proposals to plant native trees to help conceal it. However, it provides yet more evidence of why planning authorities need to monitor very closely any requirements that developers store turves properly when restoration of construction tracks is required. This in my view has been the key failure of the Beaully Denny construction.



Poorly finished culvert which is fairly typical of this section of track – the dry stone finishing in the photo was the exception. Note the grouse tick mops in the background.

My main grouse – an appropriate word here as that is the main wildlife you are likely to see? – is that most of the culverts have not been properly finished. This I hope is something which will be pursued by the CNPA.



Another more minor grouse is that vehicles continue to be driven over areas which have been “restored” adversely affecting vegetation recovery.

Its within the context of this work that the North Drumochter estate made a further planning application to remove the requirement from the planning consent to plant native trees alongside the track. I am pleased to say that CNPA officers recommended that this be rejected ([see here](#)) and the Planning Committee endorsed that recommendation. Both the North East Mountain Trust and Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group had objected to the removal of this condition and I suspect that helped the CNPA to stand its ground.

On the north section of the track, the main short-term landscape impact of the continued requirement to plant a 5m strip of native trees between it and the existing shelterbelt will be to soften the edge of the line of trees. If the shelterbelt was ever to be felled, however, it would then be the only thing screening the track. It is therefore a good decision in landscape terms. Its good too for ecological

reasons. While there is generally too much emphasis on planting native trees, rather than reducing deer and sheep numbers and seeing what grows (trees will grow in some places not others), here the trees will provide an alternative to the intensive grouse moor management which dominates the landscape. They should provide a home to other forms of wildlife and maybe even a partial refuge to some of the creatures which are persecuted on the grouse moors.



To construct this section of track Balfour Beatty as the main contractors allowed imported material to be dumped on the moor without any apparent attempt to save the vegetation beneath (there is no evidence of vegetation being stored

Further south, along the section of track which remains to be restored, the native trees will fulfil a far more important landscaping function as the track runs higher across the hill away from the existing A9 shelterbelt and is highly visible. The restoration of this middle section of the track poses considerable technical challenges as it has basically been floated across the moor. In my view the best solution would be to remove all the excess aggregate from site – rather than trying to bury it under vegetation – and use it for the construction of the new A9. Perhaps the CNPA could persuade Transport Scotland

and the north Drumochter Estate to work together on this?

The restoration of the Beaully Denny by SSE



The second “Drumochter” item considered by the December meeting of the Planning Committee was an update report on SSE’s restoration of the Beaully Denny [Item10AABeaullyDennyUpdate](#).

14. SSE has recognised that revegetation is not happening in certain sections of ground and proposes to undertake a trial of deer mitigation during year 3 (2018). This will extend to the area around the Drumochter area. The trial will consist of fencing off deer and sheep and reseeding with appropriate species.

This represents a breakthrough as SSE had previously been claiming the restoration of the Beaulieu Denny was nothing to be concerned about and that the destruction caused to the landscape could be repaired through natural regeneration alone. CNPA staff are to be congratulated in getting SSE, who are a very powerful organisation, to accept this officially after doing nothing for two years.

SSE provided a summary report of this year's survey results ([see here](#)) for the Planning Committee. This contains no analysis of what caused the problems while the solutions it's proposing to pilot in 2018 – some re-seeding and fencing off of ground – are minimalistic. The entire focus of the report is on vegetation. There is no mention of the landscape issues and more specifically of the failure of SSE to ensure that where the track was removed, the land was restored to its existing form as required by the original planning consent. This has left large "benches" cut across the hillside (photo above) which are still being used as estate tracks (below) and have a considerable landscape impact:



By contrast, although I was disappointed the CNPA report did not cover SSE's failure to restore landforms as required, the report does explain why re-vegetation has been so poor:

There appear to be two main reasons for this. Firstly, in some areas, the soil management and handling during construction as well as restoration was poorly executed, leaving little soil material or very wet ground and secondly, there has been no clear management for grazing sheep and deer. It is clear that even where some regrowth has occurred it is heavily cropped by mammals.

Its good to see CNPA recognise that for effective restoration to take place vegetation and turf has to be set aside and stored properly from the beginning. Evidence that SSE failed to do this can be seen everywhere:



A great swathe of moorland just north of the track as “restored” under SSE’s aegis. There has been an attempt to keep vegetation separate from the stony substrata with the result there is now a boulder field like the one created by the Glen Bruar hydro

The CNPA and SSE reports differ too on their assessment of the seriousness of the situation. The SSE survey claims that:

“Of the sites monitored throughout the CNPA area, 41% are assessed as being in Good or Excellent condition for revegetation and a further 20% are showing demonstrable improvement.”

and then classifies the remaining 39% as being of concern. The CNPA by contrast are sceptical about the improvements claimed and conclude

“59% are mediocre or sparse and more than half of these were also sparse last year, with no significant improvement so are likely to required additional mitigation measures to ensure full revegetation within the five year period”

Having walked the entire Drumochter section of the Beaully Denny I have to say I have strong doubts that the sites SSE chose to survey are representative – it would be in the public interest the full survey is released – and that the CNPA’s assessment of the situation is far nearer the mark. My view is that at least 2/3 of the “restoration” is not fit for purpose.



Tower south of Dalnaspidal. Some revegetation has taken place but because soils have been so disturbed not replaced properly grass and rush have replaced heather (as seen beyond the tower).

While I don’t doubt that grazing is having an impact on the ability of vegetation to re-colonise bare ground, this is not the fundamental issue. Because of the way the ground has been disturbed, SSE has created more mineral soils which will promote vegetation that is good for animals to eat. Couple

that with the large number of deer in the southern part of the National Park and you have a problem. The proposed solution to fence off areas, avoids the issue. It would be far better for SSE to be asked to finance deer culls and compensate the estate for removing sheep from the area and aid vegetation recovery that way.

Even better would be for the CNPA to advocate the solutions which have been developed in Glen Bruar, where a failure to store vegetation properly during the hydro pipeline construction ([see here](#)) created a landscape scar several kilometres long just like through the Drumochter. Those scars have now almost disappeared due to the application of different techniques, which involve careful robbing of vegetation, and in a very short timescale ([see here](#)) with McGowan again the contractor. So why not at Drumochter?

What needs to be done to make the Beaully Denny restoration happen

While I very much hope that CNPA staff keep up the pressure on SSE, I would like to see them encouraged by their Board and Planning Committee to go several steps further than they have at present and:

- Consider the Beaully Denny restoration from a landforms perspective and more specifically how to heal the scars that have been left by the poor removal of the construction tracks. A first step on this would be for SSE to commission an independent report on what needs to be done to restore the landscape to its original state (as required by the Scottish Government planning consent). A plan could then be developed to implement this prior to any further vegetation restoration work.
- Press for SSE to adopt a similar approach to landscape and vegetation restoration at Drumochter as was taken at Glen Bruar.
- Reject the proposal to deal with grazing impacts through fencing and instead focus on how to reduce the number of grazing animals at Drumochter (which would also support the Board decision to require the retained section of track on the north Drumochter estate to be screened by trees)
- Create a Drumochter landscape steering group which would bring together SNH, Highland Council, SSE and Transport Scotland (due to the A9 dualling) in order to ensure a holistic approach is taken to protecting the landscape, with a view to ameliorating/remediating past damage and mistakes and ensuring that these are not repeated when the A9 is dualled.

Most of this should be financed by SSE and would cost them far more money than their current meagre proposals. As a consequence I expect SSE to be resistant to it despite their self-proclaimed mission to set an example as a responsible business. The most likely way to achieve change, will be if the wider public starts calling on the Scottish Government and SSE to fulfil their responsibilities and not leave everything up to the CNPA who, in the wider scheme of how this country is run, are not a particularly powerful public body.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. hill tracks
4. landed estates
5. landscape
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7. Scottish Government

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