

Time to stop the desecration of Glen Coe and Glen Etive (2)

Description

The Glen Etive hydro proposals



The head of Glen Etive from the Trilleachan slabs. The Allt Mheuran flows down the first side glen or the Allt Ceitlein flows down Glen Ceitlein, the glen behind that and in front of Stob Dubh.

After the developments at the head of Glen Coe ([see here](#)), just when one thought it couldn't get any worse, seven planning applications have been submitted for hydro schemes in Glen Etive on land owned by the Dalness Estate.

Each scheme has been submitted as an individual application with its own set of papers (which you

can look up [here](#) using the reference numbers given below). While there are dozens of documents for each scheme, a significant number of these comprise identical information, assessments and mitigation measures which apply to all schemes, with only minor tweaks to tailor what is said to the specific proposals of an individual scheme. The number of documents is still daunting, over 100 for each scheme, and its very difficult to understand what is being proposed in each case (with Planning Statement, Support Statements and Environmental Impact Assessments covering much of the same ground). I have therefore extracted some information and presented in the table below as a quick reference point and to make it easier to appreciate the cumulative impact of the schemes as a whole:

| Scheme | Planning Reference | Size | Permanent new Access Track | Width main intake & wing wall | Other intakes & wing wall | Other comments |
|------------------|---------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Allt Fhaolain | 18/02740 | 586kw | 2.7km | 27m | 1 x 2.9m | Most objections Grampian Club Hut |
| Allt Charnan | 18/02738 | 1035kw | 1.7km | 18.5m | 1 x c18.5m | In area conifer forest |
| Allt na Gaoirean | 18/03024 | 980kw | 285m + 175m | 16.5m | 1 x ?m | Uses 2.5km existing forest track |
| Allt Mheuran | 18/02741 | 1540kw | 1.8km | 15m | 1 x 25m | Wild Land Area |
| Allt Ceitlein | 18/02739 | 810kw | 1.7km | 20.7m | 2 x 2.7m | Wild Land Area |
| Allt a Chaorainn | 18/02742 | 1640kw | Short track to powerhouse | 21m | 1 x 21 m | WLA 1.6km construction track to be reinstated to stalkers track |
| Allt a Bhiorain | 18/03026 | 715kw | 90m | 20m | 1 x 2.9m | Uses forestry access. Lower section in felled area |

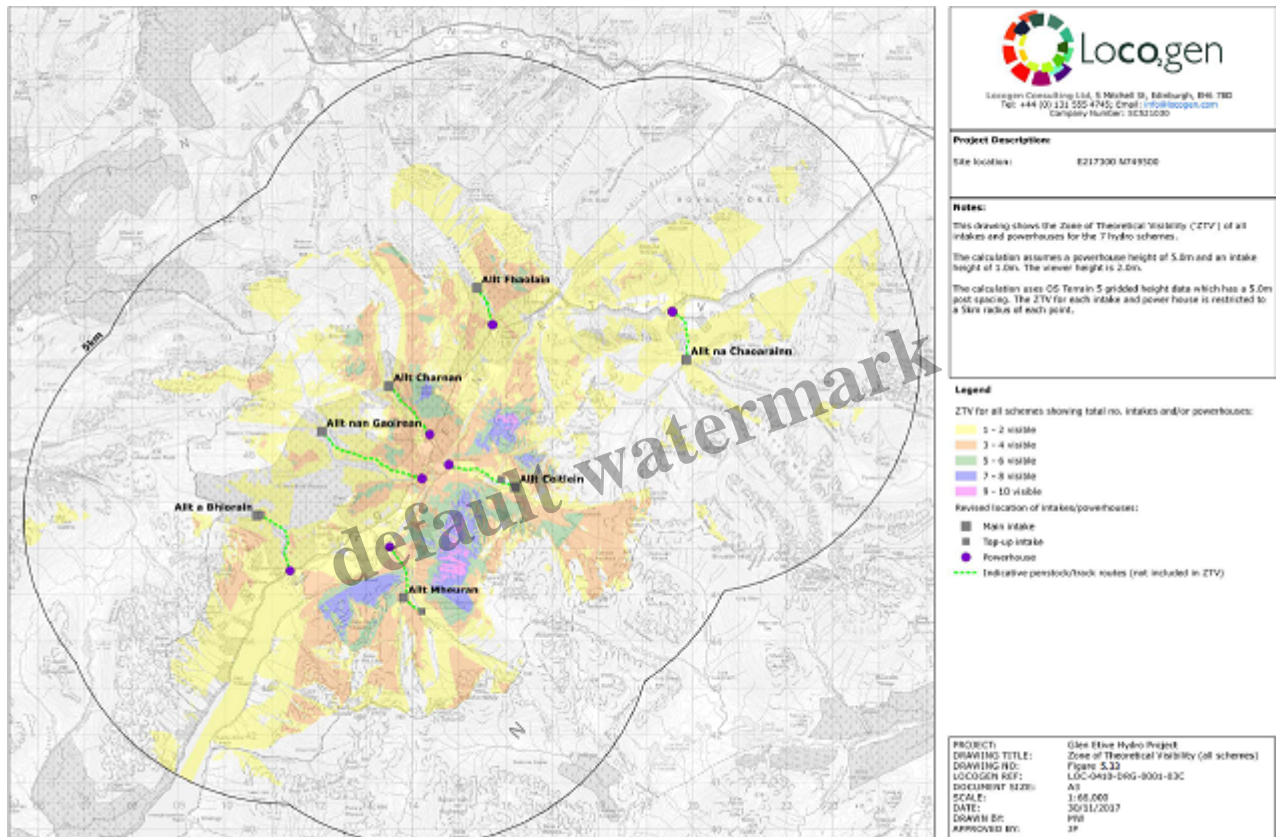
NB each scheme has a separate powerhouse

Thanks to the lead given by the Grampian Mountaineering Club ([see here](#)), whose hut at Inbhirfhaolain is very popular, and Mountaineering Scotland ([see here](#)) there has been significant opposition to the developments from the public – the first time this has happened with run of river hydro schemes in Scotland (the Glen Affric hydro schemes, for example, were approved without any objections). While both the Grampian Club and Mountaineering Scotland have objected to a number of the schemes, the focus of other objections has been on the Allt Fhaolain scheme where there are specific issue about the guarantee of future water supplies to the hut and the impact of the noise from the powerhouse on those staying there. This has resulted in over 30 objections to the Allt Fhaolain scheme compared to 6 for the Allt Mheuran, for example.

My view is that there are serious concerns about ALL the schemes and their cumulative impact and will

explain why in the post. While it will be interesting to see how the planners and the Council respond to the objections, without far more and without wider political pressure, I believe Highland Council will ultimately discount the objections as they did with the Kingshouse and approve the scheme. This is because landscape, wild land and everything else both outdoor recreationists and tourists find special about Scotland's countryside, comes a poor second to development in our planning system.

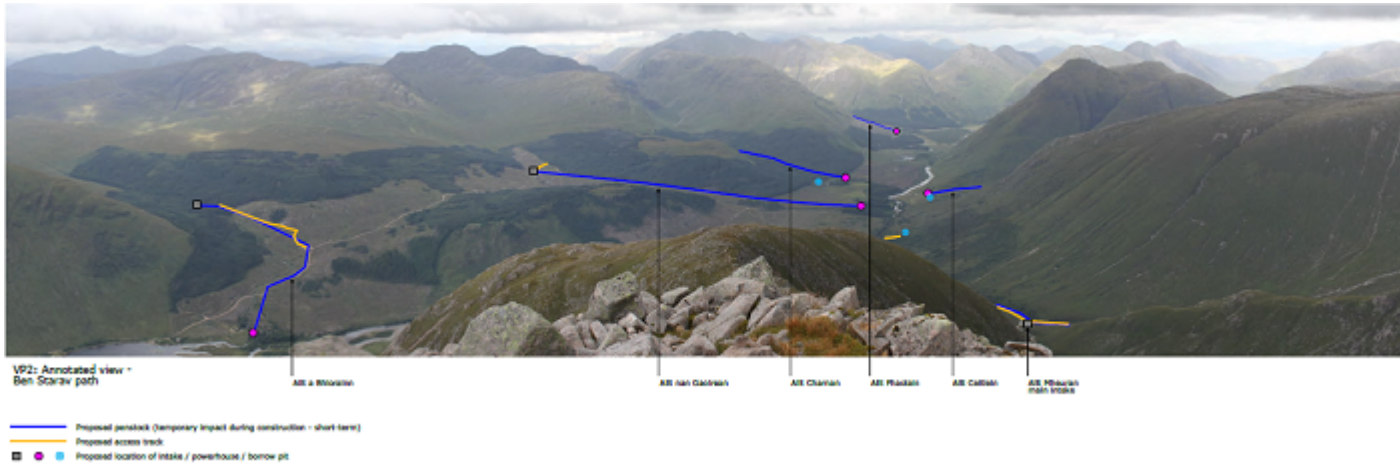
The visual impact of the hydro schemes



Assessment of area from which the schemes will be visible – described as zones of theoretical visibility – with the different colouring indicating how many schemes will be visible from each area. The tracks are marked as green lines. Note how the map fails to show all the intakes – there are at least two for each scheme.

All of this affected area lies within the Ben Nevis and Glen Coe National Scenic Area.

The photo diagram below, besides illustrating the extent of the impacts, illustrates a number of serious defects in the visual impact assessment:



Six of the seven schemes view from “the walker’s path” on Ben Starav

The viewpoint seems chosen to conceal most of the nearest hydro scheme, the Allt Mheuran (bottom right) and fails to mark the line of all the access tracks (which should have been highlighted in yellow). The developers landscape assessment concludes that after the construction phase there will be no long-term significant landscape impacts.

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Glen Etive with the Allt Mheuran and regeneration in the foreground – photo credit and copyright Da

So, first thing to state clearly is that there are going to be 8.2 km of permanent new access track – yes, that’s five miles of new track in a relatively small area famed for its landscape importance.

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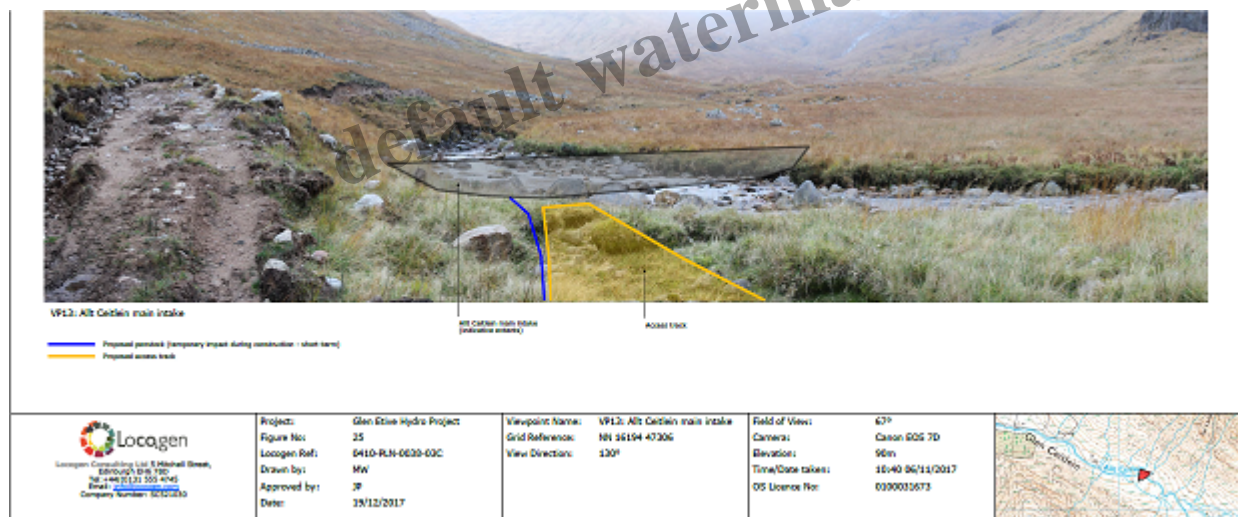


Glas Bheinn Mor and Ben Starav with the Allt Mheuran flowing out of the Coire system – what will th

There is no proper attempt to evaluate the landscape impact of the construction of permanent tracks into these side glens. In only one scheme, the Allt Chaorainn, is it proposed to restore the construction track and I cannot find any explanation why.

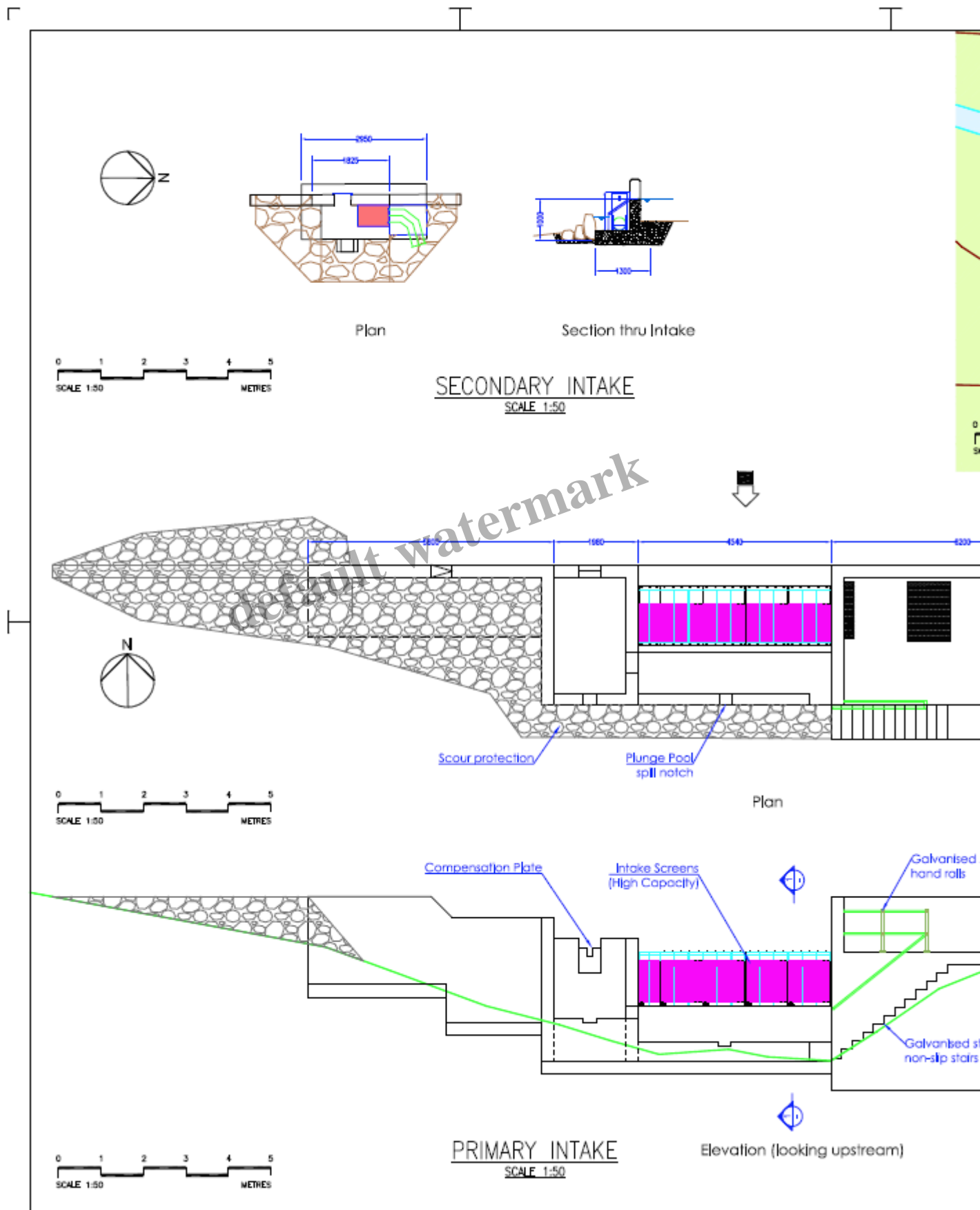
The answer may be linked to the fact that, after pre-application discussions, Dickins Hydro Resources Ltd, the applicant, decided not to go ahead with schemes in the two burns which run west into the Etive from either side of Creise, the Allt Fionn Ghlinne and the Allt Cam Ghlinne. Perhaps the planners advised that yet more development close to the entrance to Glen Coe (see my last post) would be unacceptable? If so, perhaps the developer concluded that they would consider a scheme on the Allt Chaorainn if the track was restored? Whatever the explanation, if the construction track can be restored for one scheme it could be restored for all.

To complicate matters as far as I can find the application also fails to state explicitly that the estate has already constructed tracks up some of the side glens, although evidence for this and their impact can be found in the planning documents (see below). Again, as far as I have been able to ascertain, these have been constructed without planning permission to which the estate might respond by saying they are for agricultural purposes and therefore permitted developments. The planning applications, if approved, would in effect consolidate these tracks and make them bigger.



Photomontage of new intake in Glen Ceitlein showing there is already a track beyond the proposed intake. The application says nothing about whether the developers/the estate propose to restore the section of track along the Allt Ceitlein which heads even further into the Wild Land Area or the areas where the two tracks may run in parallel.

The second major landscape issue are the intakes.



Intake diagram for Allt Charnan: on the map the secondary intake is shown as much smaller than the

width; there is no illustration of the size of the intake pools on the map; the intake walls appear 4-5m

ALL of the schemes have two intakes (table above) and one has three. Many of these are large, with six being over 20m broad if their wing walls are included. Together with their height, what that means is an area of water is going to be impounded behind the dams although how much is NOT made clear. Intake pools and infrastructure will therefore have a significant impact on landscape even if all the hydro tracks were restored. While described as run of river hydro schemes actually most appear more than that.

The third landscape issue is the applications fail to assess how the construction of 7 new buildings to house the turbines, a significant increase for a barely inhabited glen, will impact on its character. Its important to note here that one of the most valued scenic aspects of the Glen is the River Etive and all seven buildings will be located close to the river.

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“Despite the legitimate concerns about littering, it’s a magical place for car camping for those newer to the outdoors, and most leave it as they found it” (David Lintern)

Glen Etive is also a magical place for wild swimming, canoeing or just wandering along the river..

Fourth, I can find no mention in any of the applications about how these power stations will be connected to the grid although there is a reference to a new underground powerline being dug to connect the schemes to the grid. There appears to be no assessment of the impact of this but it would add considerably to the area of disturbed ground.

And, fifth, related to all these proposed works, the application basically asserts that all the restoration work will be successful. With few firm proposals about either construction or restoration – for example all the applications state the exact lines of tracks and pipelines are still to be determined – this is impossible to assess. The experience of hydro schemes elsewhere suggests without very full and detailed specifications and a high level of supervision this is unlikely to happen.

The Developer has marketed these schemes to Highland Council as though they were selling a house:

“The Development benefits from a high landscape and scenic quality within Glen Etive providing opportunities for fishing and canoeing/kayaking and particularly during summer months, it is popular with scenic car journeys, informal camping and walking”

This misses the point completely. Its the impact of the development on this landscape which is what matters not whether the development is in a beautiful setting and its important to consider the impacts of the different elements of the schemes as a whole. Unfortunately, SNH, as they did at the Kingshouse and White Corries ski track, claim that the integrity of the National Scenic Area won't be affected by the developments. I could not refute this any better than John Mackay (who used to work for SNH) and who has objected to each and every application:

SNH's comments

14. The SNH submission asserts that the applicant's proposals do not challenge the integrity or the special qualities of the NSA designation. I disagree as follows.

- The word *integrity* is important to the first test in the SPP2 policy guidance on care of nationally protected areas (see footnote 7 on the next page). SNH's own interpretation of this word is to be found in its *Landscape Policy Framework*. Here, the text states "...Overall integrity is defined as the wholeness of the area, the unity or soundness of the whole being unimpaired, recognising that the entire area of the designation is valued and adverse effects to part of it is damage to the unity or soundness of the whole"⁶. The emphasis here is with aspects of completeness or wholeness, but there are other more subtle resonances in this complex word (*integrity*) in respect of *sustaining quality and merit*. The clutch of schemes proposed by the applicant will significantly impair the landscape of Glen Etive (as described above) and given that Etive lies at the heart of the highly-rated mountain massifs of Glen Coe and Blackmount the integrity of the NSA designation will, by SNH's definition, be impaired.

Extract from John Mackay's objection – his whole objection is will worth reading and worth downloading from the planning portal (its been formatted in a way too big to include k here).

The hydro schemes and the Etive Mountains Wild Land Area



Three out of seven schemes lie mostly within the Etive Mountains Wild Land area. The other four schemes lie in the strip on the west side of the River Etive which are excluded from this. While the assessment is not entirely clear, it appears to be the river itself which forms the boundary of the Wild Land Area.

While the road down Glen Etive, the buildings and the intensive forestry plantations and the River Etive itself are excluded from the Wild Land Area this does not mean they are not valuable in wild land terms. Indeed its the wild scenery by the river, and the wild feel of the river, that attracts many people to Glen Etive.



River Etive in Autumn – photo credit and copyright David Lintern

While SNH's Wild Land Assessment ([see here](#)) says nothing about the River Etive itself, it does recognise that the feeling of wildness that people get from the floor of the glen (and the excluded area) is of value:

Many people view the WLA from outside its edges, including along the A82 over Rannoch Moor and through Glen Coe, the A85 around Loch Awe, and the roads through Glen Creran and Glen Etive. From these, although views into the interior are limited due to the screening effect of the adjacent slopes, it is nonetheless possible to experience some of the wild land qualities of the area, including a perception of naturalness and ruggedness.

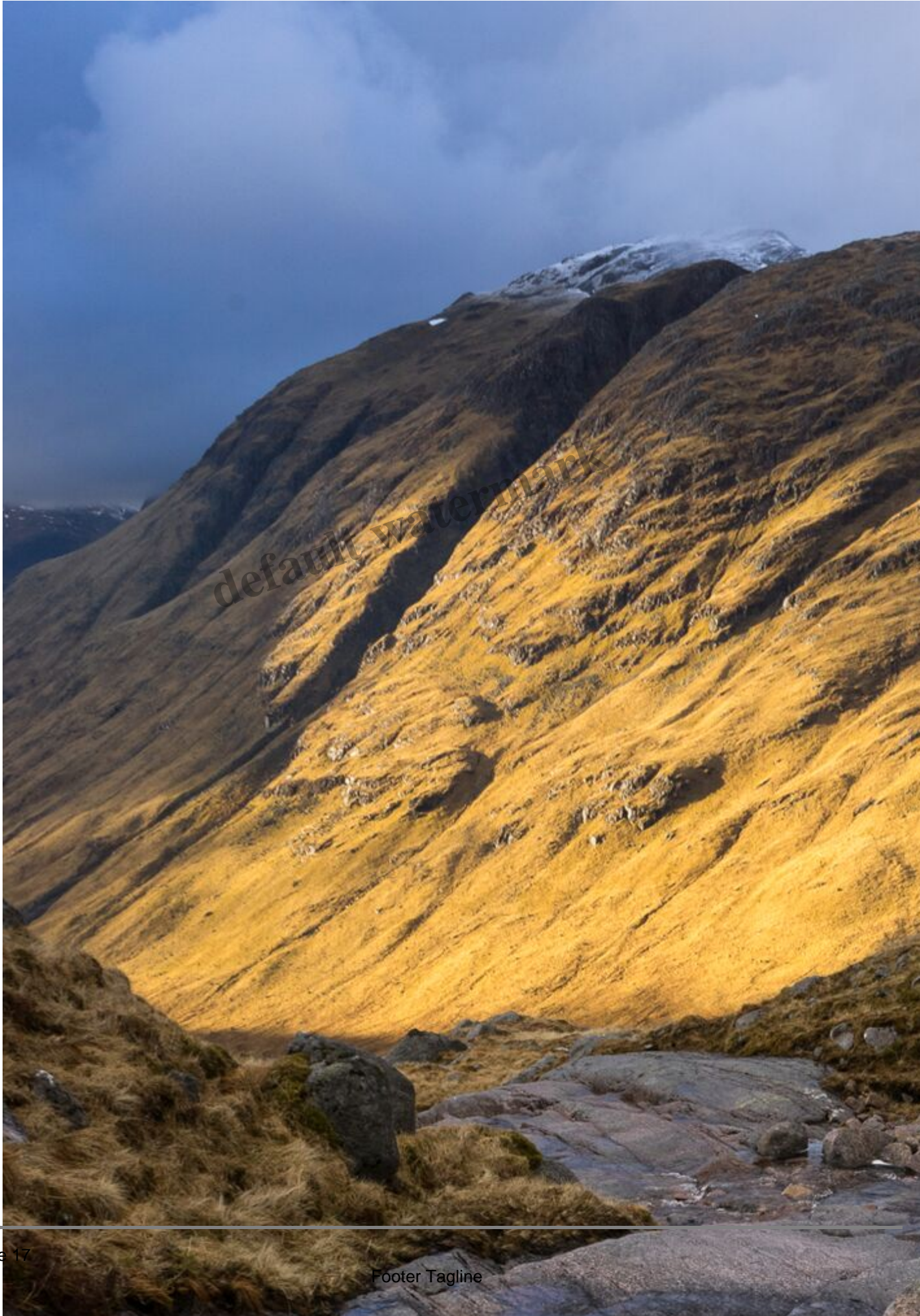
In Glen Etive this is felt even more than in the other glens mentioned here, in no small part because the road is so small and there is relatively little traffic.

The distribution of human artefacts and contemporary land use within this WLA does not follow the conventional pattern of being more prolific around the margins and leading to a gradually more remote interior with fewer human elements. In contrast, there is a strong presence of human elements within the centre of this WLA (albeit outside the boundary, as an exclusion around Glen Etive) and within some interior glens that diminish the sense of remoteness. The effects of these human elements are amplified where they link across the area between the interior and the margins, for example by vehicular tracks or power lines.

The Wild Land Assessment And hints at the potential to improve the landscape by reducing the adverse impacts of industrial forestry in the glen:

Although lying outside the WLA boundary (within an exclusion in the centre), Glenetive Forest encroaches upon the wild land qualities within the surrounding area. This is partly due to its central location surrounded by mountains, as well as its very large size and extension onto elevated slopes, prominent high-level haul road and frequent forestry activities, and incongruity of shape, colour and texture.

While four of the schemes are partially in plantation forestry and make some use of existing forest tracks, there is nothing in the applications I can find to suggest that these forests will be restructured or that woodland regeneration will be promoted which would allow the hydro infrastructure eventually to become hidden by native woodland. And the powerhouses as well as other parts of these schemes will clearly be visible from the Wild Land Area.



Upper stretch of the Allt Ceitlein (well above the proposed hydro) at dusk in February – photo credit

The recreational experience – noise

One of the pleasures of Glen Etive is its quiet and does not suffer from the incessant traffic noise of Glen Coe. That quietness is a pleasure, adds to the wild land experience and indeed allows people people to listen to nature. If you have not stood by an operational hydro you should do so as they are noisy. Seven power houses, seven sources of incessant noise as long a there is water in the burns. The Grampian club have addressed the issue well in their objection (link above).

The recreational experience – water

The River Etive is very popular for both swimming and canoeing and, because the hydro schemes are in side burns and deposit water back into the Etive, the volume of water there will not be affected. Its a different matter for the side burns and the Allt Chaorainn is one of the best rivers for serious kayakers in Scotland.

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Allt a Chaorainn at night in January – photo credit and copyright David Lintern

While the developer engaged with with the Scottish Canoe Association none of the mitigation measures the SCA thought they had agreed were included in the application and the SCA has therefore objected. Their objection, which includes a detailed assessment of the paddling on the Etive tributaries, is well worth reading and can be obtained via planning portal (its too big to include here)

The cultural impact

John Murray in his wonderful book, the Literature of the Gaelic Landscape, devotes a couple of pages to Duncan Ban Macintyre's waulking song set in lower Glen Etive, the Song of the Ewe. This is both a description of making cloth, which starts with the famous Gaelic poet who was once a gamekeeper at Dalness, going out to beg for wool from his neighbours, but is also a songline to the people and places in the lower Glen – just where the hydros will be concentrated. Both Glen Ceitlein and Inbhir Charnan are mentioned by name.

Murray's book also describes the links between Glen Etive and Deirdre of the Sorrows, one of the most well known and tragic heroines of early Gaelic literature.

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The lower stretch of the Allt Mheuran, overlooked by Glas Bheinn Mhor, would have been well known to Duncan Ban MacIntyre and is the location for the Robber's waterfall

The Robber's waterfall on the Allt Mheuran gets its names because bandits used to ambush drovers from up there. Etive was important for droving and Scotways record the route along Loch Etive as one of the oldest in the highlands. Glen Ceitlein has a number of shielings.

None of this history is mentioned in the application although its important both in itself and for the wild feel of the glen. We should be conserving, not bulldozing, this history and the planners should be taking full account of it.

What can be done to stop the proposed hydro schemes in Glen Etive

I have tried to describe here why Glen Etive is such a special place and how the hydro schemes threaten to destroy that. In my view they should be rejected in their entirety. No ifs and buts, its time to say no. Whether you agree with this position or are just concerned with some of the schemes, here are some things that you can do:

- Object to ALL the applications you think are wrong. You can do this by first finding the application on the planning portal ([see here](#)) using the reference number in the table above and then using the comments button. If you have already objected to the Allt Fhaolain application please consider objecting to other schemes too.
- If you are a paddler, support the SCA and add your objection to theirs, particularly for the Allt a Chaorainn scheme
- If you live in Highland Council area contact your local councillors and ask them to ensure the Council puts in place policies that will protect special places like Glen Coe and Glen Etive from hydro developments and, if you live in the South Area, whose councillors should decide the application, ask them to oppose the development.
- Contact your local MSP and explain your concerns about the proposed developments in Glen Etive: sk them to support and ;promote amendments to the Planning Bill which would offer greater legal protection to the landscape in places like Glen Coe and Glen Etive.
- In any lobbying point out the vital importance that the landscape, including the history it tells, has for tourism and the rural economy.

Acknowledgement

I'd like to thank David Lintern, who is a very fine photographer and landscape writer ([see here for his blog](#)) for providing me with photographs for this post. They illustrate better than words ever can the beauty that is at stake in Glen Etive. David is a regular contributor to Walk Highland.

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. landscape
2. planning
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5. wild land

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