

The Coulin run of river hydro schemes has destroyed a unique landscape.....for whom?

Description



The re-modelled National Scenic Area and Wester Ross Wild Land Area with Beinn Liath Mhor (ridge) and Beinn Liath Beag (right). The scene looks worse than it should because the hydro construction meant to be restored to 2m maximum and the land at the side restored with vegetation kept for this purpose.

Last week Community Land Scotland, who have the ear of the Scottish Government, was reported in the Herald as claiming *“Rural communities are being “airbrushed” out of Scotland’s rugged landscapes by policymakers who care more about maintaining an artificial wilderness”* ([see here](#)). One of CLS’s central arguments is that protection of wild land is preventing development in the Highlands. The

evidence from the ground does not support this as I was reminded on a visit to Torridon over the weekend where policy makers have allowed run of river hydro schemes to wreak havoc on one of Scotland's most special landscapes for almost no community (or carbon) benefit. This post once again, following my posts on the Glen Etive hydro schemes ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)), strays outside Parkswatch's normal scope, which is to scrutinise what is going on in our existing National Parks rather than places like Torridon that deserve National Park status.



Looking over from Sgorr nan Lochaine Uaine to Beinn Liath Mor during a gap in the showers

I was staying at the Ling Hut and had not walked in the Coulin "Forest" for far too long. I had forgotten quite how wild and rough it is until dashing up Sgurr Dubh on the Friday evening and trying, unsuccessfully, to get across to Sgorr nan Lochaine Uaine before dark. On Sunday, a wild and windy day, I traversed that hill over to Beinn Liath Mhor before being blown east along the ridge. I had had a mind to descend to the footpath, an old Right of Way, between Achnahellach and Coulin but changed both mind and direction when I saw the new and unmistakeable hydro scar.



You can just see the hydro scar at the end of the river which wends its way along the fine hanging valley between Beinn Liath Beag (left) and the easternmost top of Beinn Liath Mhor (right).

I had come for a break from campaigning but, once seen, the scar was almost impossible to ignore and I can only describe the visual impact of this scheme on the landscape as brutal.



I guess my sensitivities were heightened from having travelled across an area of dramatic scenery, threaded my way down through crags not marked on my old OS Map, slipped and slithered across the moor and seen almost no sign of humanity apart from the path along the Beinn Liath Mhor ridge. The shock would not be quite so great approaching this scheme from below.

The Easan Dorcha hydro scheme lies within the Wester Ross National Scenic and Wild Land Areas. Our National Planning Framework for Scotland claims that: *“National Scenic Areas and National Parks attract many visitors and reinforce our international image”*.

So how could this be allowed to happen?.



The upper intake which captures water from the Allt Coire Beinne Leithe whose fine waterfalls lie not far from here. Note the strip on the left of the track just before the right hand wing wall of the hydro where vegetation has been restored properly and compare it to all the land round about.

The developer, Hydroplan, said in their Construction Method Statement, which is available on the Highland Planning Portal ([see here](#)) that:

“9.6 Landscaping

The ground will be graded to screen the wing walls of the intake structure where possible, by using riprap or rock boulders and surplus excavated spoil and turf and following any recommendations from the ECoW (Ecological Clerk of Works) after construction is completed.”

AND

4.3 Stripping and storing materials

- *Careful side stripping of top peat from all areas to be disturbed. Depth of strip to be at least 250mm but to be determined on site depending on ground conditions. Peat and turf to be lifted and stored at the edges of the construction corridor in one operation where possible and retained as intact turfs where feasible.*
- *Do not mix sub-soil with top-soil or peat.*
- *Use defined top peat storage areas to avoid mixing of materials and double handling where possible, with top peat stored 'vegetation or turf side up' to avoid desiccation.*

etc etc etc.

The evidence shows that much of what was promised to reduce the landscape impact of the scheme has not been delivered. Instead, further completely unnecessary damage has been done to the ground in an attempt to find peat and vegetation to cover up the mess.



Areas of “stolen” vegetation from above first intake

A similar story to what is going on in our National Parks.



The extensive use of rip rap bouldering to reduce erosion of the rivers above and below the intake will create a long-term landscape scar – vegetation is unlikely to be able to colonise such bouldering for a very long time.

The section of the planning assessment dealing with visual impact is worth a read to understand how little value our planning system places on landscape and wild land and for its wishful thinking:

Landscape and Visual Impact – Although located in a highly sensitive and valued landscape setting, wider long term impacts on landscape features, landscape character, and visual respondents, are not predicted to be significant, other than locally. There will be significant localised construction and short term impacts on local landform and moorland vegetation along the pipeline route. The long term access track to the intakes will remain as a permanent feature with a local impact. The hillside crossed by the pipeline is exposed to view from Coulin Pass and the path up Easan Dorcha and has no existing tracks across the upper hill. Long term impacts should be low except at close proximity to the permanent access track. Construction impact will be significant on the Proposed Right of Way passing the powerhouse site at Stoney Bridge and into Easan Dorcha, with local disruption to access. No significant impacts are predicted on hill peaks, dwellings, or the condition of wild land or wilderness. There may be a prolongment and intensification of local disturbance from construction traffic regardless of the route of the proposed forest route, combined with the other hydro schemes and with timber

Conclusion - It is considered that this relatively modest scheme which has limited environmental impacts is in accordance with the emphasis in government policy to encourage sustainable renewable energy schemes. It is also supported by the general policies on hydro energy developments in the Highland wide Local Development Plan.

All relevant matters have been taken into account when appraising this application. It is considered that the proposal accords with the principles and policies contained within the Development Plan and is acceptable in terms of all other applicable material considerations.

It is recommended that permission be granted subject to conditions.

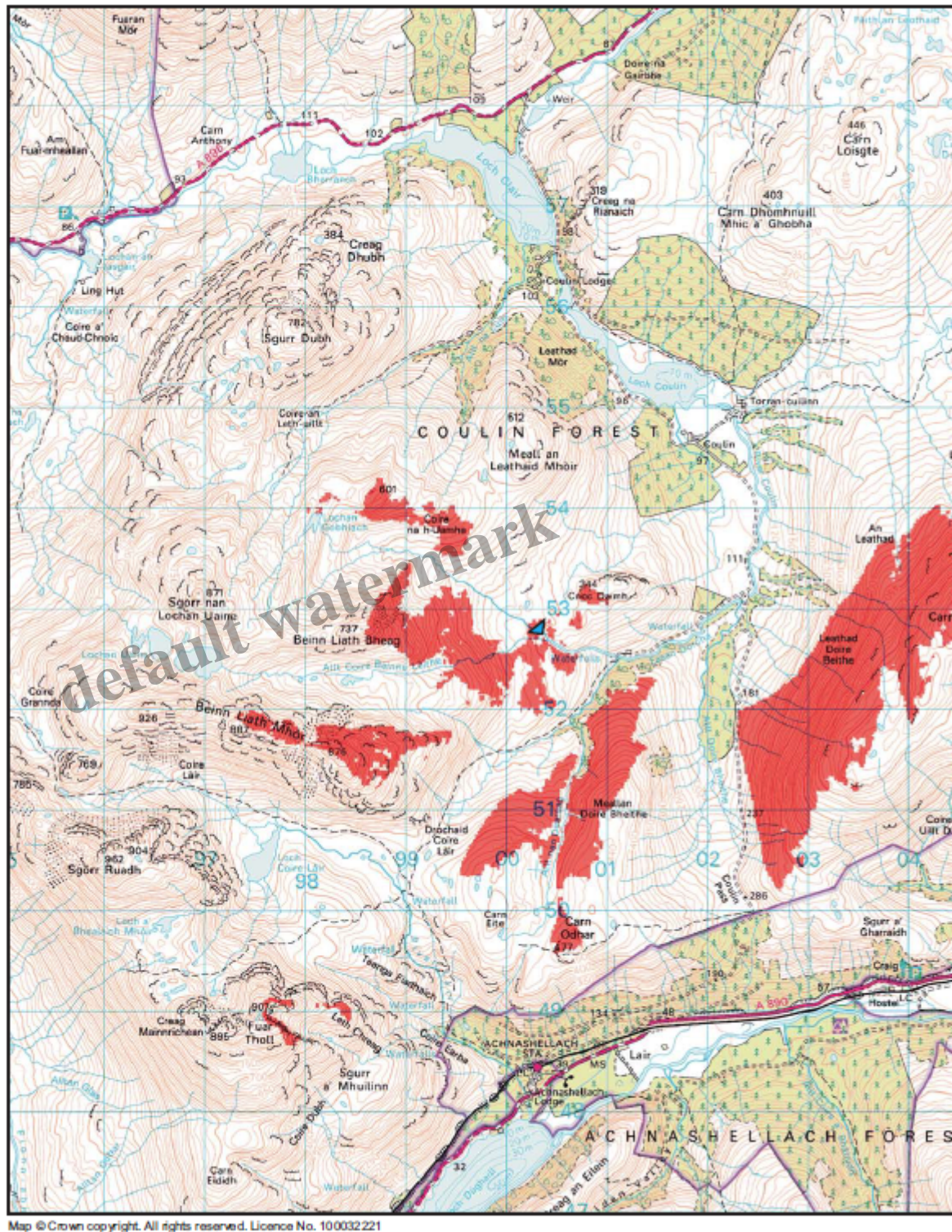
The evidence on the ground shows this assessment and its conclusion were fundamentally wrong.



The worst area of track where no attempt has been made to restore vegetation

Apart, that is, from the statement that the *“hillside crossed by the pipeline is exposed to view”*.

Unbelievably, Hydroplan’s assessment of the zone of *“visual influence”* – planning spin for areas from which a development might be visible – ONLY assessed the “visual influence” of ONE intake and not the track. The two intakes, though bad enough, are relatively tucked away. Had the map below showed the areas where the track could be seen the “zone of visual influence” would have probably doubled and clearly taken in a huge chunk of the National Scenic Area



Hydroplan's amended Visual Impact assessment shows only one intake, not two, and fails to include

Why neither Highland Council nor SNH, who also commented on the application, failed to question this totally inadequate assessment is unclear. In relation to the track, besides the failure to assess its

impact on landscape and wild land, there has then been a further failure to ensure it met the standards promised by the developer and, by implication, the Coulin Estate.



“8.1.2 Access to Intakes

*700m of new permanent tracks will be required to access Intake 5 and Intake 6. The track will be constructed as 3.5m wide construction tracks, similar to the powerhouse access, however it will be reduced to a **2m track with a central green strip of vegetation**” (Extract from Hydroplan’s Construction Method Statement)*



Lower down vegetation has been replaced either side of the track even if the ground below the track is messed up with soils and vegetation mixed contrary to the Construction Method Statement. How proper plastic culverts are compatible with the protection of National Scenic and Wild Land areas is unclear.



Lower down still, the new track passes by isolated trees – with no signs of regeneration – down to the pocket of Caledonian Pine Forest. Had the track been narrowed further and were the number of broadleaves to be reduced, the lower section of track could have been almost completely hidden.

The delegated planning report and SNH's response to the application shows there was no proper

assessment of either the impact on the National Scenic Area or the Wild Land Area:

Policy 59 – Other Important Species
Policy 60 – Other Important Habitats
Policy 61 – Landscape
Policy 63 – Water Environment
Policy 67 – Renewable Energy Developments
Policy 77 – Public Access

Wester Ross Local
Plan(Adopted, as continued
in force) :

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Policies: Wider Countryside

Additional Policy/Supplementary Guidance

National Planning Policy
Extensions Policy/Shopfront Policy
Development Plan Policy Guidelines - HIC
Design Guide/Development Brief
Others
Highland Renewable Strategy
Guidance on Development and Biodiversity

ACCORD

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CONFLICT

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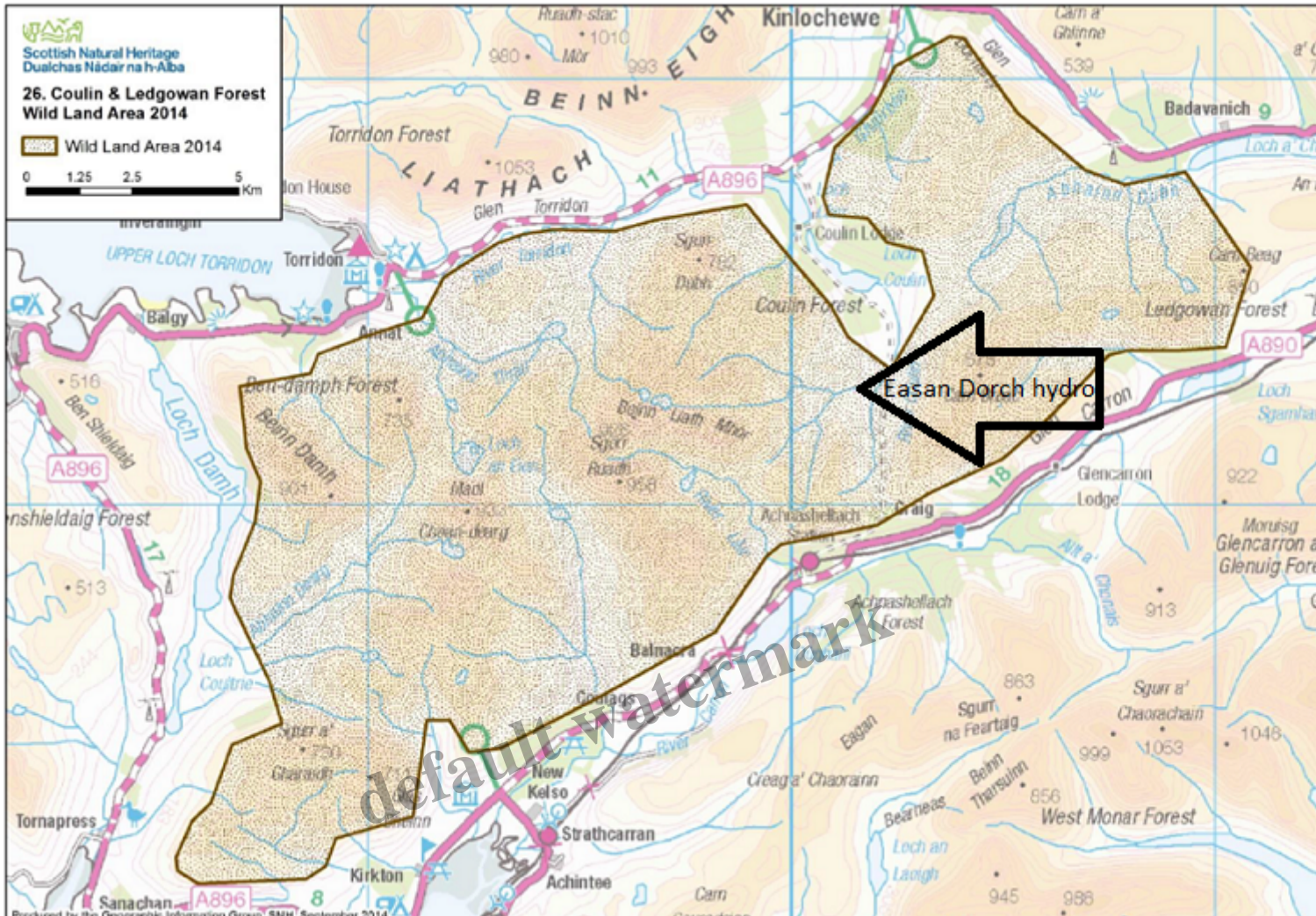
Extract of assessment pro-forma included in the delegated report by officersThe development was assessed as being in accord with every single one of Highland's Planning policies and all National Policy too with not a single area of conflict. This is clearly wrong and its also clearly wrong that Highland Council, like the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, allows decisions about run of river hydro schemes to be decided by staff under delegated powers without any critical scrutiny.

Policy 61 Landscape

New developments should be designed to reflect the special qualities identified in the Landscape Character which they are proposed. This will include consideration of form, pattern and construction materials, as well as developments where this may be an issue. The Council expects those undertaking development to include measures to protect the characteristics of the area. This will apply particularly where landscape characteristics has deteriorated to such a degree that there is a loss of landscape quality or distinctive sense of place. For developments, the Council will take account of Landscape Capacity Studies and its supplementary guidance on Sustainable Design, together with any other relevant

Highland Council's landscape policy – this is it! – is not worth the paper its written on.

While the Planning Decision in this case was taken before Wild Land was incorporated into the National Planning Framework in 2014 (it contains a clear presumption against Windfarms in Wild Land Areas but NOTHING was said about other developments such as hydro schemes) SNH's preliminary guidance on Wild Land Areas was incorporated into the Highland Local Development Plan. It was ignored despite the entire scheme, apart from the powerhouse, lying in an area of wild land (the whole scheme lies within the Wester Ross National Scenic Area)..



Interestingly, SNH in their response ([see here](#)) warned about the difficulties of restoring vegetation higher up the track but did not follow this through and no-one appears to have thought that might be sufficient reason to refuse the development.



Near the powerhouse, the access track (above another protruding plastic pipe on right) joins the old leads to the Tea House bothy. The Estate has taken the opportunity to upgrade a section of this track (centre right) with the foreground indicating how the old track used to look a(nd, presumably, how the access track is supposed to look).

Far more attention was given in the planning application to the design and location of the powerhouse than to the intakes and track, with SNH being concerned about its impact on the Site of Special Scientific Interest and urging that the ground around it be landscaped to look natural.



“10.5 Landscaping

The ground around the powerhouse will be landscaped in such a way to ensure it is blended into the surrounding landscape”

Apart from the large area of hardstanding, created with what appears to be imported stone, the design and location of the powerhouse is in my view quite appropriate for a National Scenic Area and edge of the Wild Land Area

By contrast, no care and attention has been given to the appearance of the first large borrow pit, which is in the National Scenic Area:



“On completion the floor of the pit will be broken up and re-graded to an undulating, rough profile, ramping fill material up against the base of the face of the excavation. Surplus rock material in the vicinity of the pit will be removed into the pit. The base of the pit, and back face where feasible, will be fully covered with reclaimed top peat spread to a minimum of 300mm or to match the top peat depths in the adjacent area” (Construction Method Statement). Its unclear if this statement applies to the borrow pit in photo above or that featured below or both – but whatever the case, its not happened.



The electricity sub-station – another nice building with inappropriate suburban landscaping

There was no evidence of any construction vehicles still on site so one must assume in the eyes of the estate, developer and council this development is now completely and satisfactorily finished.



Laydown area and borrow pit with Beinn Eighe behind

As is often the case, those responsible have not even removed surplus materials.....

What needs to happen?

I hope this post this post has shown that this development (and there are another three hydro schemes on the Coulin estate) has been an absolute disaster in landscape terms and like other such schemes will in the long term destroy Scotland's reputation for having world class landscapes. Highland Council formally bears a large degree of responsibility for the trashing of the Highlands through approving inappropriately located, poorly designed and poorly executed run of river hydro schemes (I will provide further evidence of how they have impacted on Torridon special landscape when I revisit the area in three weeks time and have a re-look at other schemes I first visited two years ago). Behind them

however is a national policy framework and culture which assumes all run of river hydro schemes are a good thing and should be developed as quickly as possible with only token consideration given to other issues.

Unfortunately, back in 2012 only one person objected to the scheme – all credit to them ([see here](#)) – and there was no response from the local community council but we should really not have to depend on people lodging objections to protect our finest landscapes. Our planners should be doing this for us. For this to happen we need:

- a much stronger national planning framework and rules in relation to landscape (which as a first step could incorporate guidance on hydro schemes, as well as windfarms, into guidance on development in National Scenic Areas and areas of wild land)
- much stronger Local Development Plans which set out a clear framework for landscape protection
- and planning staff with the time, knowledge and expertise to make good decisions (its not the responsibility of frontline staff to ensure they are properly equipped to deal with cases like this).

Behind such developments however we have landowners and developers who would appear not to care. On the way back, along the River Coulin, I pondered how the estate could have accepted this mess before coming across this sign by Loch Clair:

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COULIN ESTATE HYDRO SCHEMES

SCHEME ELEMENTS

There are 4 schemes currently planned for Coulin Estate. They are 'run-of-the-river' and consist of a number of intake weirs (low concrete structures) buried pipelines and a powerhouse to house the turbines. The life of a hydro installation can be at least 50 years or more and is invisible apart from the small dam on the burn and the turbine shed which is no larger than a double garage.

PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

The development of hydro schemes is carefully regulated and the scheme underwent a rigorous planning process during which detailed surveys of flora and fauna were carried out along with consultation with relevant agencies and the local community. The

maintenance of the purity and quantum of the water in the burns has been of paramount importance.

TRAFFIC

There will be more traffic on some of the Coulin Estate Roads during the construction period, and we would ask all those walking, riding or cycling on such roads to take special care and be aware that vehicles may well occupy the whole width of the road or track.

CONSTRUCTION

If you encounter an area where construction of any kind is being carried out, will you please maintain a clear berth and, if a machine is operating close to where you are walking, please draw the operator's attention to

your presence and wait until he waves you on.

We are confident that you will appreciate the benefit this scheme provides for Scotland as a whole and especially for the very fragile economy of Highland Estates and for those who live and work on them.

PLEASE ENJOY YOUR TIME ON COULIN ESTATE.

The construction will commence in March 2016 and last for about 18 months with final grid connection sometime before August 2017.

Energy from renewable sources is an important element of the Scottish Economy and all the electricity generated from this scheme will be exported to the National Grid.

The Easan Dorcha is only one of four hydro schemes which were approved

So what is the Coulin Estate and Hydroplan doing to ensure that their claim that this scheme would be "invisible apart from the small dam on the burn and the turbine shed which is no bigger than a double garage"

is true?.

Instead of attributing the economic challenges faced by ordinary people living in the Highlands to Wild Land, Community Land Scotland should be challenging the myth promulgated by the Coulin Estate and others of the “*fragile economy of Highland Estates*”. These estates are owned by some of the richest people in the country, nay the world, and hydro schemes, which are paid for by the public (that’s you and me) in higher fuel bills, are adding to their wealth with almost no benefit to the local community (the four Coulin hydro schemes will need no more than 1 part-time employee to keep them going) or the environment.

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. hill tracks
2. landed estates
3. landscape
4. planning
5. renewables
6. restoration
7. scottish natural heritage
8. wild land

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