

A new minimum standard for hydro tracks? The Coulags scheme

Description



Coulags hydro intake, on the Fionn Abhainn, Strathcarron – the planning condition required wooden
Photo Credit John Digney

I have followed some of the Parkswatch blogs about the awful hydro tracks around Glen Falloch ([see here](#)) and seen them for myself from the hills. In July 2017 we were staying in Lochcarron and I was horrified to see a hydro scheme at Coulags at the start of the walk up Maol Chean-dearg. This is both a Wild Land and National Scenic Area.

Construction was in full flight and the mess was terrible – huge wide track; bare earth and displaced

boulders; junk everywhere etc. But the notice promised that there would be a tidy-up; the track would not be retained but the existing walkers' path upgraded and used for access to the intake for maintenance. I was sceptical!

We were back there this year and lo and behold, they have done what they promised.



Photo credit John Digney

There's hardly anything to show for it after a few hundred metres of wide vehicle track to the powerhouse right at the start. The intake is a mile upstream and the path is admittedly wider than before, but nothing like the eyesores here in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park and elsewhere. The vehicle track has gone; they have re-landscaped it and re-planted clumps of vegetation over it which are taking well. Soon, I believe, there will be little evidence it was ever there.



Photo credit John Digney

The photos show the track this July, less than a year after completion.



It certainly challenges the need for the wide tracks, so prevalent elsewhere, and a winding course is so much better.

We were on Fuar Tholl a few days later right above it in clear weather and you could barely see the track, unlike the view of the Glen Falloch ones from the Crianlarich hills. The scheme is invisible from the public road.

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This photo shows the only bit where you are really aware of the track that was there last year during construction. Elsewhere it has virtually vanished. If they intend to use vehicles to maintain the intake/penstock they will be small enough to negotiate the upgraded footpath – quad bikes maybe..

Personally I could just about live with small-scale hydro if all schemes were done as unobtrusively as this.

Editor's Note

A reason for this success lies in the planning documents. The developer, Green Highland Renewables, restored the construction track using footpath standards and techniques:

SNH advise that the scheme is located within an Wester Ross NSA. They consider that assessment is generally helpful and the proposed design adopted. Particularly welcome are:

- the commitment to restrict the working corridor
- the use of specialist landscape contractor construction and restoration set out in the are adhered to,
- the restoration and upgrade of the existing

And as John shows, they kept to their word. Quite a contrast to the Coulin hydro scheme ([see here](#)) just over the hill. Highland Council and our National Parks should learn from this!

Category

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Tags

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2. hill tracks
3. landscape

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