

The proposed Glen Etive hydro schemes – who benefits? The need for land reform

Description

Following my last post on the seven Glen Etive hydro schemes ([see here](#)) I found that Mountaineering Scotland had issued an excellent news release prior to the site visit by Councillors on Monday ([see here](#)). This does not appear to have been picked up by the mainstream media. What did get coverage in the Press and Journal and in an online publication called Energy Voice ([see here](#)) was that “locals” – it did not say who qualified for this description – wanted more say in the decision process and that they had been promised £34k a year. This post takes a look at who will really benefit from these schemes before the Planning Committee today.

You can catch the planning committee webcast – a really great example of openness which should be followed by both our National Parks – live from 10.30 Wednesday or afterwards ([see here](#)).

Socio-economic impact of the 7 hydro schemes

The Committee Report has a section on the socio economic impact of the schemes which makes no mention of ANY community benefit payments:

Socio-economic impact

8.9 The submitted EIAR recognises the importance of tourism to the local and national economy, however there is no direct assessment of the predicted impact of the development on tourism. There are a high number of visitors (tourists and recreational users) to Glen Etive for varied reasons – walking, sightseeing, canoeing, photography etc – and it is very difficult to predict how many of these visitors would stop coming to the Glen as a result of the construction works, and what the loss would be to the local economy as a result. Given the temporary nature of the disturbance (over a two year period), the mitigation measures proposed and as visitors are generally in the Glen for a purpose (for example climbing a particular Munro, canoeing a particular route or driving down the Glen as part of a wider visit to the area), it is considered that the impact on the economy will not be significant in the local or national context. The EIAR highlights there will be direct and indirect short term positive effect on the economy during the construction phase from the use of local services and suppliers. Not referred to are the benefits to the Estate owners of income from the hydro schemes which will help to sustain local employment in the Glen.

Perhaps Dickins Hydro has only offered this to the local community recently as a result of the strong opposition across Scotland to the proposals? If so, that would be a deeply cynical act.

For £34k is chickenfeed compared to what these schemes are likely to make for Dickins hydro and the local landowners. I have just been looking at the latest accounts of Ben Glas Power ([see here](#)) which operates the 1.6 megawatt scheme that has affected the Eagle Falls at the head of Loch Lomond and is a similar size to the 1.64 MW Allt a Chaorainn Scheme in Glen Etive. It earned £703,847 in payments for the year to September 2018 despite, it appears, not running at full capacity because of a commitment to maintain the waterfall during the daytime. Scaled up for Glen Etive, which will produce

c6.5 MW in all, one could expect earnings of c£3-3.5m across the 7 schemes. In other words the Community are being offered just 1% of earnings. They would be much better off with a proper National Park or even the equivalent of England's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which receive some funding unlike our National Scenic Area.

In terms of jobs, the Ben Glas accounts report that the company has no employees and my understanding is the Falloch schemes as a whole have created one part-time post. Glen Etive is unlikely to be much different.

What the Ben Glas accounts do show is who really profits from these schemes. The Company made £238,651 profit after tax and paying interest on loans. That is over a third of turnover. This suggests that the profits from all 7 Glen Etive hydro schemes could be in the region of £1m a year. Offering £34k of this to the local community is hardly a generous offer.

Moreover, while I have no information about the model under which the hydro schemes will be operated, it is certain that Dickins Hydro or any future operator will have agreed leases with the two estates concerned should the hydro go ahead. The Ben Glas accounts give some indication of the sums involved:

10 Operating lease commitments

Lessee

At the reporting end date the company had outstanding commitments for future minimum lease payments under non-cancellable operating leases, as follows:

	2018	2017
	£	£
	698,825	679,938
	<u>698,825</u>	<u>679,938</u>

This shows the Glen Falloch Estate is due to paid almost £700k in future from just this one scheme. The Dalness and Glen Etive estates, which own the land on which these hydro schemes would be located, may not have been able to negotiate such a good deal but if they have that would be around £3m shared between them.

That is a sizeable proportion of the purchase price of the Dalness Estate which was reported to have been bought for £2.7m in 2014. What price our landscape?

Estate and Developer hypocrisy



The bridge over the River Etive by the Allt Chaorainn which would be replaced to provide access to the scheme if approved

When I visited the Allt a Chaorainn before Xmas I was met by a barrage of access signs that contravened access rights. The former fortified bridge over the River Etive by the Allt Chaorainn may now be unlocked and its barbed wire removed but there was still an unlawful notice telling people to keep to the path.



The second unlawful sign on the gate to the field by Alltchaorin,

There was no danger in this field, which I walked through on my way back down, following the line of the proposed pipeline and to look at the site of the proposed powerhouse. And if there had been, it should have been specified.



The sign above the cottage at Alltchaorin

At first sight, the third sign appears more reasonable. The trouble is it is placed to deter people from using the bridge over the Allt Chaorainn (just visible on the left) used to access Beinn Ceitlein which is outside the curtilage of the cottage. What's more, the cottage does not appear to have human residents.

I understand the signs were still up last week. It would be interesting to know if they were still there at the time of the Committee visit because, if so, Councillors might pick up this statement in the Committee Report:

*“The proposed hydro scheme is located at the top end of Glen Etive, and is the closest of the schemes to Rannoch Moor and the A82. The Allt Chaorainn is a focussed glen with high hills on each side and behind. At the foot of the glen are two houses, one habitable and one badly fire damaged. They are accessed by an existing junction onto the public road and a bridge [first photo] crossing of the River Etive and existing private [second photo!] track, which is also proposed to serve the proposed hydro scheme. To the east of the site is the popular ‘Skyfall’ view point on the public road. This section of the River Etive is very popular for canoeing/kayaking. There is an existing public right of way from the bridge to the river and the glen beyond. A previous re-route of the footpath away from the existing houses has left a poor route for walkers and kayakers accessing the river. **The proposal includes the replacement of the bridge over the River Etive and a new section of public footpath to join with the river footpath. Going over the bridge, the route will follow the existing track to the houses. It will then spur off to the left before reaching the houses, where the powerhouse is to be situated. The new footpath will spur to the right after the powerhouse and the penstock and temporary construction track will cross the moorland to the left and run up the glen parallel to the river. The penstock gently climbs the glen at the base of the adjoining hill until it reaches a ‘T’ in the river, where the Allt Coire Ghiubhasan joins the Allt Chaorainn. This is where the intakes are proposed. Walkers routes continue on up these deeper glens.**”*

Yes! The Developer is now proposing a new footpath to benefit walkers, presumably with the approval of the estate, over the ground where, until last week at least, the estate was unlawfully trying to deter access! This ploy is just as cynical as offering £34k to the local community. Whether the Developer will be able to buy off canoeists remains to be seen as negotiations are reported in the Committee Report to be continuing.

The Dalness Estate

Besides the Allt Chaorainn signs and all the unlawful No Camping signs in the glen, there is a large cluster of relatively new Private Property signs around Dalness Lodge on land where there is a legal right of access. Duncan Ban MacIntyre, the Gaelic poet and gamekeeper, who lived in the glen would have been appalled.



One of several such signs to be found on the extensive fencing around Dalness Lodge

Why put up these signs in any case when the land on both sides of the fence is now “private”?

The Dalness Estate appears to be owned by Charles and James McAlpine through a company, Dalness Estates Ltd, which they set up in June 2014 at the time they purchased the estate. The accounts show it employs 3 people. On the Companies House website James McAlpine’s occupation is given as investor while his brother, Charles Rho McAlpine, is described as a restaurateur with an address in Korea. Companies House records also show that the estate has been partly financed through what appears to be a £4m loan from C Hoare and Co. This was secured with a charge lodged

over 34-35 Dean St, a very expensive property in London.

Dalnness Estates Limited
Balance Sheet
As at 30 June 2017

Registered number: 09096829

	Notes	2017		2016	
		£	£	£	£
FIXED ASSETS					
Tangible Assets	5		6,054,255		6,060,000
				6,054,255	6,060,000
CURRENT ASSETS					
Debtors	6	48,746		15,223	
Cash at bank and in hand		24,604		28,624	
			73,350		43,847
Creditors: Amounts Falling Due Within One Year	7	(6,165,094)		(6,274,363)	
NET CURRENT ASSETS (LIABILITIES)			(6,091,744)		(6,230,516)
TOTAL ASSETS LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES			(37,489)		(169,516)

It appears that the brothers invested a significant amount in the property, which was reputedly bought for £2.7m and is now valued at over £6m. Most of the investment appears to have been in the lodge which is now let for luxury sporting purposes ([see here](#)) rather than the landscape or other local facilities. The 2019 Rates, 7 nights for 12 guests, are given as follows:

Sep and Oct £12,600
Nov to May £8,400
Jun to Aug £10,500
Minimum 3 night stay from £3,600

The contrast with the way most other forms of outdoor recreation enjoy the glen, by camping, is striking. There is of course almost no reasonably priced accommodation in the glen because almost all the land is controlled by the two estates. The signs on the fence say something about wealth and social division.

The power and interests of the landowners explain not only why these hydro schemes are on the table – but does it say about what they care for the landscape? – but also I believe the attitude of the local community.

The Glen Etive hydro and the need for land reform

For the local community have no power and are almost totally dependent on the landowners. If they had power, the Planning Committee might now be considering just one hydro scheme in one of the forest areas from which the local community would derive a lot more income than they are now being offered. Most people who care about the glen would have settled for that. Come to think of it, if Highland Councillors see the “community benefit” as the key issue, maybe the Planning Committee could just approve one scheme with the condition that the Developer matches their current offer of £34k to the local community.

I have been unable to find out the exact permanent population of the glen but I suspect its less than 20 people. Many will live in tied houses, dependent on their employment with the estates and, like all estate workers will work long hours for very little pay. Within this context, its not surprising that some of them may genuinely see the £34k offer as an opportunity. Yet this money is basically coming from the same landowners who are responsible for their current difficulties. If the landowners paid more and gave up land for housing, there would be no need for these schemes. Hence the need for land reform.

Glen Etive should not, in my view, be developed in a way that destroys the character of the glen. It should however be possible to provide more and better housing – the glen once supported far more people before the big sporting estates came along – and better paid jobs than will ever be provided by these hydro schemes or these landowners. That is the real challenge for sustainable development in the Highlands.

There is a fine tradition of radicalism among Councillors in the Highlands, which understands and is committed to tackling land issues. I hope the Councillors on the South Planning Committee draw on that in taking a decision today.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
2. National Parks

Tags

1. access rights
2. landed estates
3. planning
4. renewables

Date Created

February 20, 2019

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