

The hill and hydro roads disaster at the head of Glen Prosen

Description

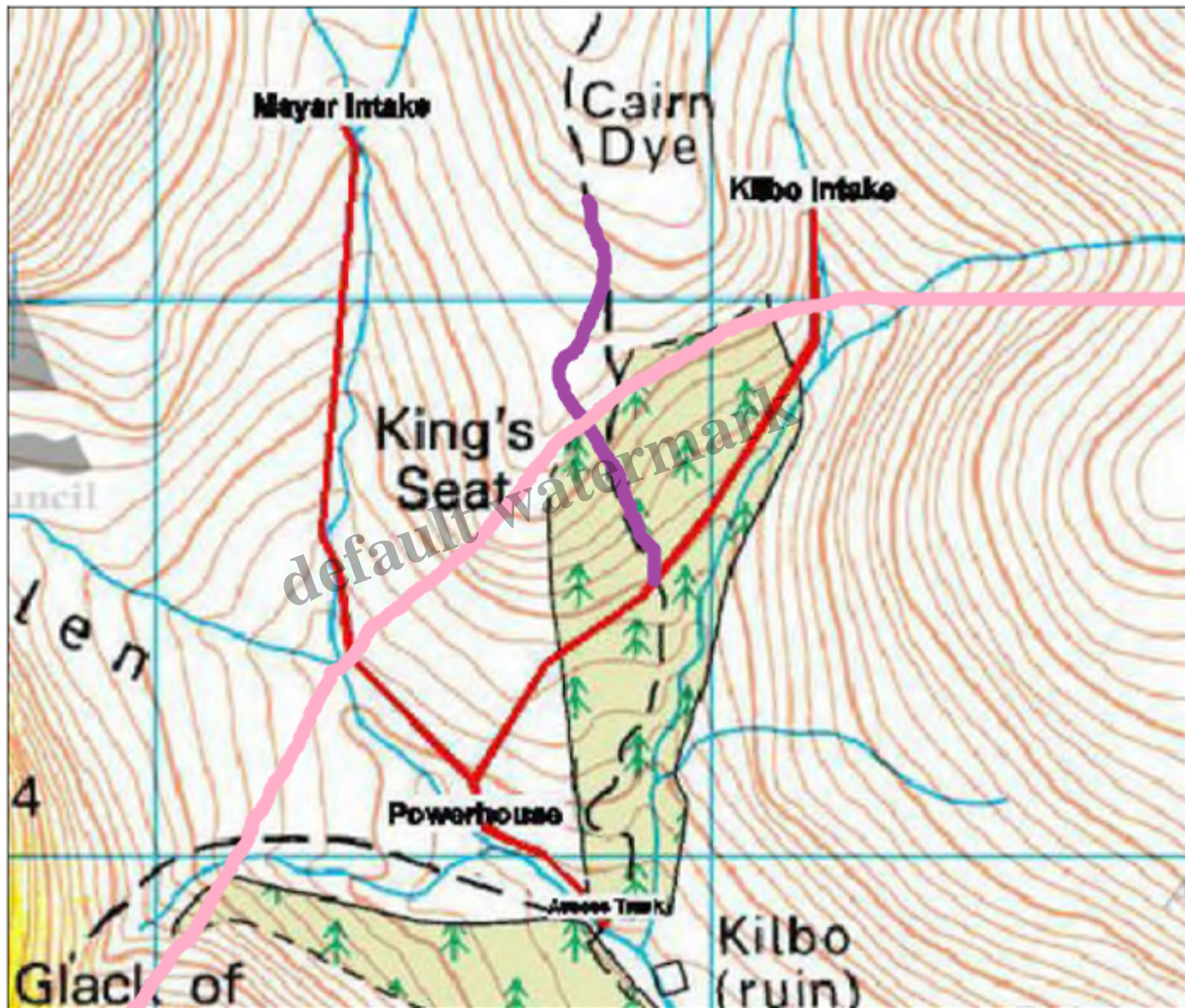


Figure 2. Site Plan

Extract from Planning Report, with the red denoting the two pipelines/construction tracks. I have added two further lines: the purple demarcates the approx line of the track constructed without planning permission; the pink the approx boundary of the Lochnagar-Mt Keen Wild Land Area which came into affect in 2014 (after planning permission was granted).

I had walked up Glen Prosen a couple of weeks ago to look at the new roads at the head of the Glen but was prompted by the 26 traps we saw to blog first on wildlife and trapping in the Cairngorms National Park ([see here](#)). This post will look at the two new roads associated with hydro schemes

and a third new road which has been constructed without planning permission.

First though its worth commenting that the documentation for the Kilbo hydro scheme does help inform the extensive debate created by Helen Todd's tweet and my post on the Prosen of traps. A couple of commentators defended trapping on the ground it helped such as waders. The evidence from the 2013 wildlife surveys conducted for the Glen Prosen hydro suggests otherwise:

Birds

As part of a Moorland Bird Survey, there was sightings of golden eagle, merlin, buzzard and kestrel however it is considered that no raptor species are breeding within two kilometres of the project site. It is noted that there are no breeding waders in the catchment. (Extract from Construction Method Statement Nov 2013)

Secondly I was struck by this, also from the construction method statement:

Action No.	Receptor	Element of Works	Requirement	Responsibility	Action
18	All wildlife	Preventing trapped wildlife	<p>Unless otherwise agreed in writing with the Planning Authority, throughout the duration of all site preparation and construction works, the following precautionary measures are recommended and must be adhered to: All stored or trench pipes with a diameter greater than 200mm should be capped at the end of each working day</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open trenches or pits of a depth greater than 1 metre should have escape ramps provided and must be checked at the beginning of each day for potential entrapments Ensure "escape" holes at intervals under protective site fencing (in agreement with Biodiversity Officer) 	Principal Contractor/Project Ecologist	<p>Measures will ensure that risks to local wildlife are minimised during site construction operations.</p> <p>If trapped animal encountered on site contact SNH for advice immediately.</p> <p>Ensure capping of pipes at end of working day</p> <p>Provide escape ramps in pits and ditches.</p>
19	Habitats	Restoration of Habitats	Adhere to Restoration Methods – see Appendix 1	Principal Contractor	Adhere to Restoration Methods – see Appendix 1

So, on the construction site ALL wildlife was being protected from being accidentally trapped in trenches or pipes while round about it is being intensively trapped. This was not about protecting water vole as the wildlife surveys found no evidence for them in the area despite the suitable habitat.

The landscape impact of the two new hydro roads

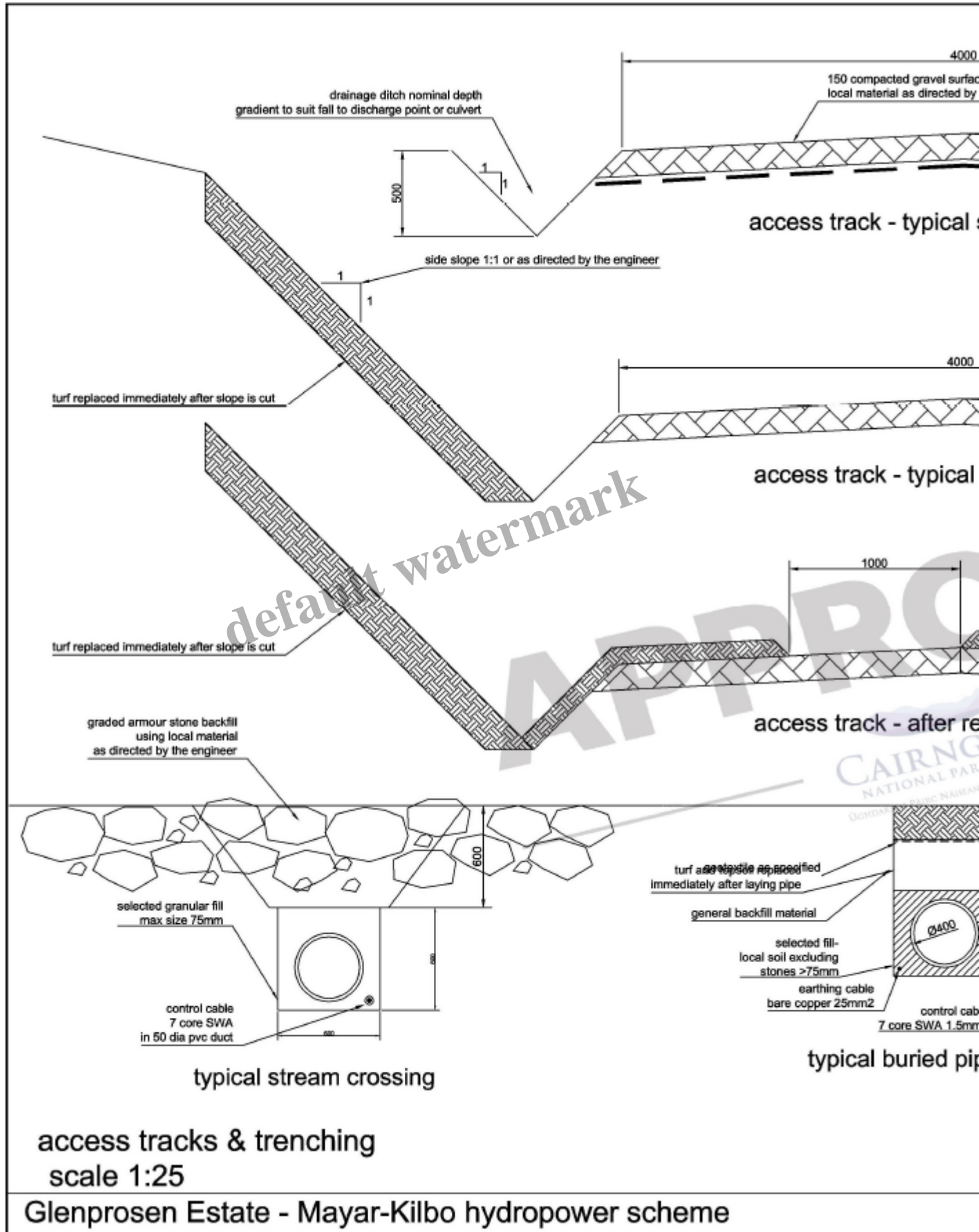


Looking down on the start of the two new hydro roads – the fork marks where the two pipelines meet head of Glen Prosen in June 2016. The location of the powerhouse can be seen just right of centre

The Planning consent for the hydro schemes required the developer to restore the construction tracks to All Terrain Vehicle width (1m wide):

“Construction phase access tracks running adjacent to the penstock pipeline routes to be reinstated to a reduced width suitable for quad bike use. During their initial construction drainage ditches to be provided along their upper verges to intercept any water flows and culvert pipes provided below the tracks to maintain continuity”

The specification/design for this was set out in the Construction Method Statement:



The first diagram shows the hydro construction tracks being four metres wide and the surface being being reduced to 1m wide for quad bike use after construction.

The specification has been ignored, with more imported material than that originally proposed and far more limited restoration of the track width:



The fork in the roads above the powerhouse, the left to the Mayar intake and the right to the Kilbo intake.

Both roads are far wider than necessary for landrover use – as you can see from the tyre marks – let alone for quad bike or ATV use.



View of the road up to the Mayar intake above where it crosses the burn

This road is highly visible from various angles. Part of the problem is the excessive width. Had it been reduced to 1m width it would be far less visible. It also however forms a straight cut across the landscape, unlike most footpaths, and this accentuates the impact.



Another view down on the Kilbo access road taken from summit of Mayar through telephoto lens Jun

Even in 2016 it was very hard to see the line of the buried pipeline. That has been done very well, including where it crosses back under the burn, and was constructed without using new imported materials. While the vegetation by the road has recovered further since this photo, the problem is that a new road has been created. As the photos shows its far too wide and straight.

The landscape impact has as a result been far far greater than was indicated in the Park's landscape

assessment:

“CNPA Landscape Officer has no objection to the proposal. It was noted that there is potential for a development of this nature and scale to be accommodated in upper Glen Prosen without significant adverse long-term landscape and visual impacts” (Extract from Committee Report)

The road to the Kilbo intake is even worse:



The road to the Kilbo intake below Driesh with the unlawful new grouse moor track visible to the left.

Part of the reason the Kilbo road is so visible is it takes a high line across the hillside.



Looking down the Kilbo road towards the hydro road junction showing how it has been raised above the surrounding ground

Couple the line with the width of the road and the way its been raised above the surrounding ground and you have a highly prominent landscape scar.

That is nothing however compared to what lies above:



View up towards the Mayar intake from just above the junction with the new grouse moor road. The part of the road is so steeply sloping on both sides that it would be difficult to drive a vehicle along

Prior to the construction of the hydro scheme, the King's Seat forestry plantation (as shown on map above) was felled. Forest roads don't need planning approval but come under the Prior Notification system and part of the reason for this terrible section of track would appear to be that it was constructed to forestry specifications. These allow wider roads for felling than the 4m construction track agreed by the CNPA. However, whatever the origins, this road has been used to construct the hydro scheme and the CNPA required this to be reduced in width to 1m.

One might have hoped that, given the disgraceful state of the upper part of the Kilbo Road that the CNPA would have taken prompt enforcement action. I will now be asking them to do so for both hydro tracks.



Close up of downhill side of cutting

The new grouse moor track



Looking down the first section of the new road, with the Kilbo hydro road visible below and two left and the old road to the head of Glen Prosen in the background beyond

It appears that the Glen Prosen Estate has used the hydro scheme construction tracks as an opportunity to construct a new road up Cairn Dye. This appears to have obliterated the historic Kilbo Path and means that there are now not just two but three hill roads within one small area at the head of the glen. There is no planning application for this and the road is not listed under those that have been developed under the Prior Notification scheme. It therefore appears unlawful.

The first section of the new road, however, is through plantation and the Glen Prosen Estate may try to claim it was constructed to help fell the forest. It should be possible to tell if that is the case from the forest plans. Above however, its clear purpose is grouse moor management and grouse shooting.



Muirburn by side of road just above forest plantation

Its symptomatic of current inconsistencies in our approach to land-use that the ground here is being damaged by muirburn when along the Kilbo Burn the CNPA made this requirement for the hydro scheme:

No work shall commence on the development hereby approved until the exact specifications and methods for the compensatory creation of riparian montane scrub is submitted to and approved in writing by the CNPA acting as planning authority.

Unfortunately, I was not aware of this requirement at the time of my visit and did not therefore go and check if has been met, but planting one place while burning the land next door makes no sense.



On Cairn Dye, looking south, with former landrover track clearly visible

The estate appears to have driven vehicles here for many years but they took a different less steep route up onto Cairn Dye and that old route had far less landscape impact.



Looking down the new road along the Glen Dye ridge – note the plastic culvert left indicating the degree of construction that has taken place

The road is far far wider than that consented for the hydro roads and there is now no sign of the green central strip that the CNPA now regards as good practice for landrover tracks.

The road runs along a line of refurbished grouse butts suggesting that one reason it was created was to avoid grouse shooters having to walk up the hill along the former historic Kilbo path (maybe half an hour from the Kilbo Bothy)



Grouse butt access road on left, further butts beyond

The new road ends near where the grouse butts end but a landrover track continues:



End of the new road, Mayar beyond. The landrover track continues on up towards the Mayar-Driesh

The landscape impact of the landrover track is far less than the new road because it is narrower and restricted to tyre lines so effectively has a vegetated strip down the middle:



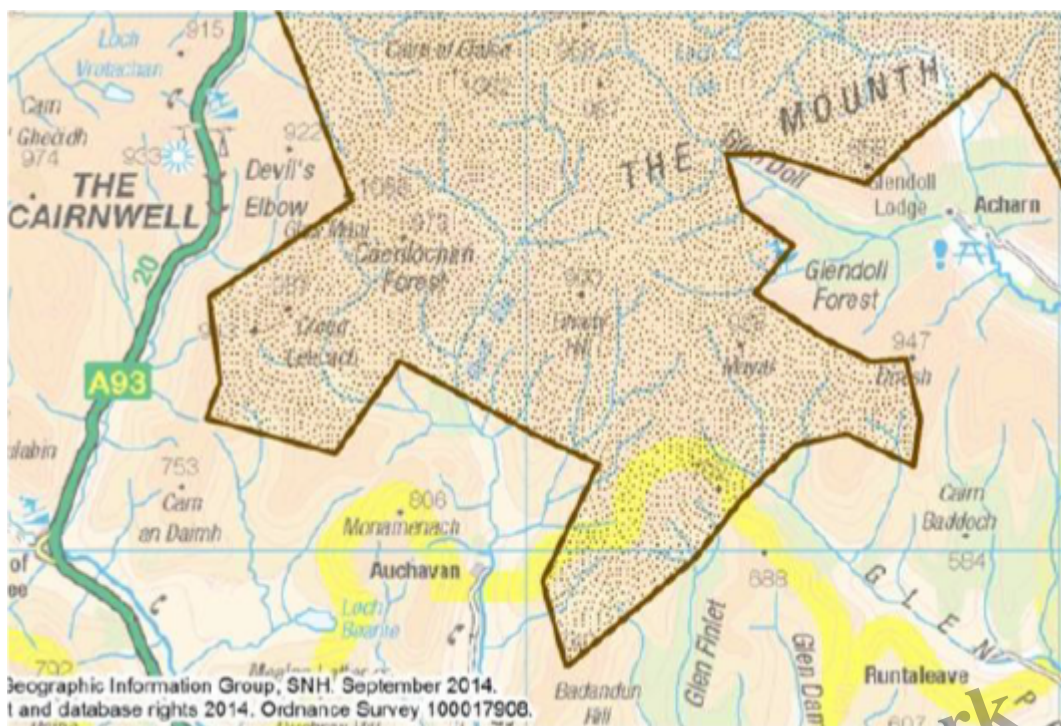
The vehicle

use has however clearly impacted on the vegetation, converting heather to grasses, thus forming a line across the landscape. This illustrates why footpaths generally have less landscape impact and are preferable to roads with green strips down the middle. If the Glen Prosen Estate accepted 1m wide tracks for quad bike use below it's hard to see how they can justify using any other vehicles here.



The Cairn Dye road viewed from Bawhelps June 2006 with Hunt Hill (on right) and Little Driesh (on left). The hydro roads are tucked into glens on either side and not visible from this particular viewpoint.

The consequences for the landscape have been significant and the track is highly visible from the high ground around the head of the glen. With two hydro roads in place on either side there can be no justification for this road. The upper part is also within the Lochnagar-Mt Keen Wild Land Area and seems likely to have been constructed after SNH's maps and descriptions of Wild Land Areas were published in 2014:



What's gone wrong and what needs to happen

I am afraid that the CNPA had badly underestimated the landscape sensitivity of upper Glen Prosen in the way it has managed these two hydro applications:

The landscape impacts of this proposal are minor, given the scale of the development and the location in the upper Glen Prosen. Conditions relating to the construction phase of the development have been proposed to minimise any short term impact. In addition, the set of mitigation measures proposed are likely to have a positive impact on the development site in the long term.

Part of the problem appears to be that the CNPA failed to monitor the construction of the hydro schemes. Had they done so, they would never have allowed the contractors to leave the site without restoring the construction tracks. Had they done so too, they could hardly have failed to notice that a further new road was being constructed without planning permission and stepped in to halt this.

The CNPA has also, however, failed to take any effective action since I first reported these roads (along with the ones on the plateau) to them in 2016. I suspect part of this is lack of resources, added to which all staff are now based in Grantown which means that it takes someone a whole day just to go and check what's happening in the Angus Glens.

If the CNPA, however, wants its expressed concerns about the landscape impact of hill roads to be taken seriously it needs to take action here.

To end on a more positive note.....

Apart from the new roads, the other elements of the Glen Prosen hydro scheme have been well done. The 3.2 km powerline from the powerhouse to Old Craig has been buried and the line of this barely discernible. The powerhouse itself has also been buried and is one of the best examples of this I have seen.





View of powerhouse from above – the cairn is presumably to alert people not to walk over the edge!



The outrace has been very sensitively landscaped



Mayar Intake with Mayar beyond

The Mayar intake is not just well located, it shows how rip rap bouldering to reinforce the sides of streams can be done sensitively so it appears almost natural (unlike the dreadful examples in Glen Falloch in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park [\(see here for example\)](#)).

All of this, however, reinforces the argument that the new hill roads in upper Glen Prosen are unacceptable and the CNPA needs to address the issues. It also provides further evidence to my view that normally – with some important exceptions – it is hydro access tracks which are the problem, rather than the hydro schemes themselves. Glen Prosen provides an opportunity for the CNPA and Glen Prosen Estate to show how if construction tracks are reduced to footpath width (and take a winding course) that that need not be the case. This needs to be combined with a decision and public acknowledgement that three such tracks on one small area of hillside would be completely unacceptable.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. grouse moors

3. hill tracks
4. landed estates
5. landscape
6. paths
7. planning
8. renewables
9. restoration
10. wild land

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