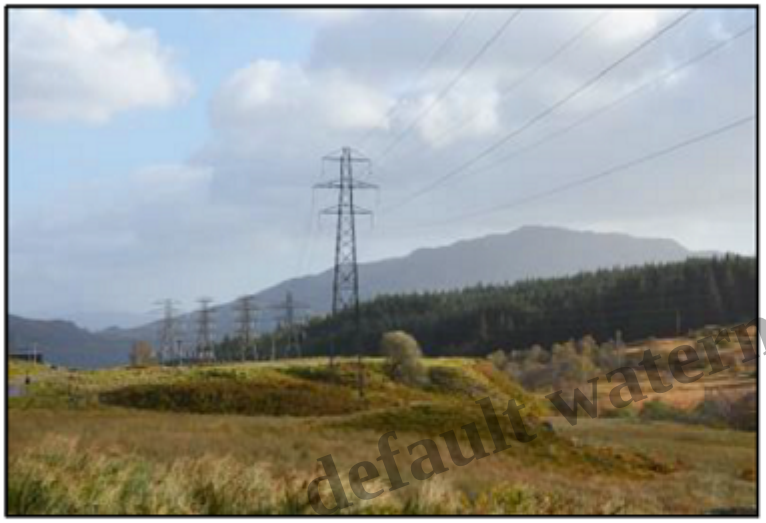
Electricity transmission and the removal of electricity pylons in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park

Description

VISTA PROJECT



Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) is promoting VISTA (Visual Impact of Scottish Transmission Assets), an initiative instigated to assess the impact of existing electricity infrastructure in the ownership of SSEN on National Parks and National Scenic Areas (NSAs) in Scotland. SSEN hopes to access a proportion of a £500m fund that is administered by the electricity industry regulator OFGEM.

Awards from the OFGEM fund will be utilised to further enhance designated landscapes by reducing the visual impact of existing overhead electricity transmission lines and substations.

Following assessment of all of SSEN's infrastructure in National Parks and National Scenic Areas, the overhead lines at Glen Sloy and Glen Falloch in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park were identified as priority areas, where the impacts of the existing infrastructure were higher than elsewhere in Scotland.

Extract from the November edition of the Arrochar and Tarbet Community Development Trust newsletter

The visual impact of electricity pylons in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding National Beauty have been a political issue for some time in England and Wales. In response to public pressure, a £500m UK wide fund was created to help underground powerlines. Scotland was allocated a share of this but development of proposals here has generally been much slower than down south where proposals were announced four years ago (see here).

Within that context, however, the Cairngorms National Park Authority has been well ahead of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority in taking advantage of this funding. In the Cairngorms National Park Projects are underway to underground 12km of powerlines around Boat of Garten and Nethybridge. This follows the removal of the powerline between Kingussie and the Lecht which the CNPA agreed as compensation for the Beauly-Denny line through the Drumochter (see here for explanation of how the two projects relate)

. Now, rather late in the day (the fund ends in 2021), there are proposals to remove sections of powerline by Loch Sloy and in Glen Falloch. This post takes a look at the proposals.

Glen Sloy

The proposals for Glen Sloy, by Inveruglas on Loch Lomond, are well described in the excellent Arrochar and Tarbet Community Development Trust newsletter:

Loch Lomond. Two lines run in parallel up the glen from the Inveruglas Power Station, while two more descend from the dam at Loch Sloy. Further lines run south towards ***Glen Loin and Arrochar.***

The glen is a popular walking route, giving access from the car park at Inveruglas up towards the summits of Ben Vane and Beinn Narnain. Cumulatively these overhead lines dominate the lower part of the glen, and substantially detract from the scenic qualities of the landscape.

Glen Sloy track: photograph (as now)

Glen Sloy: What is proposed?

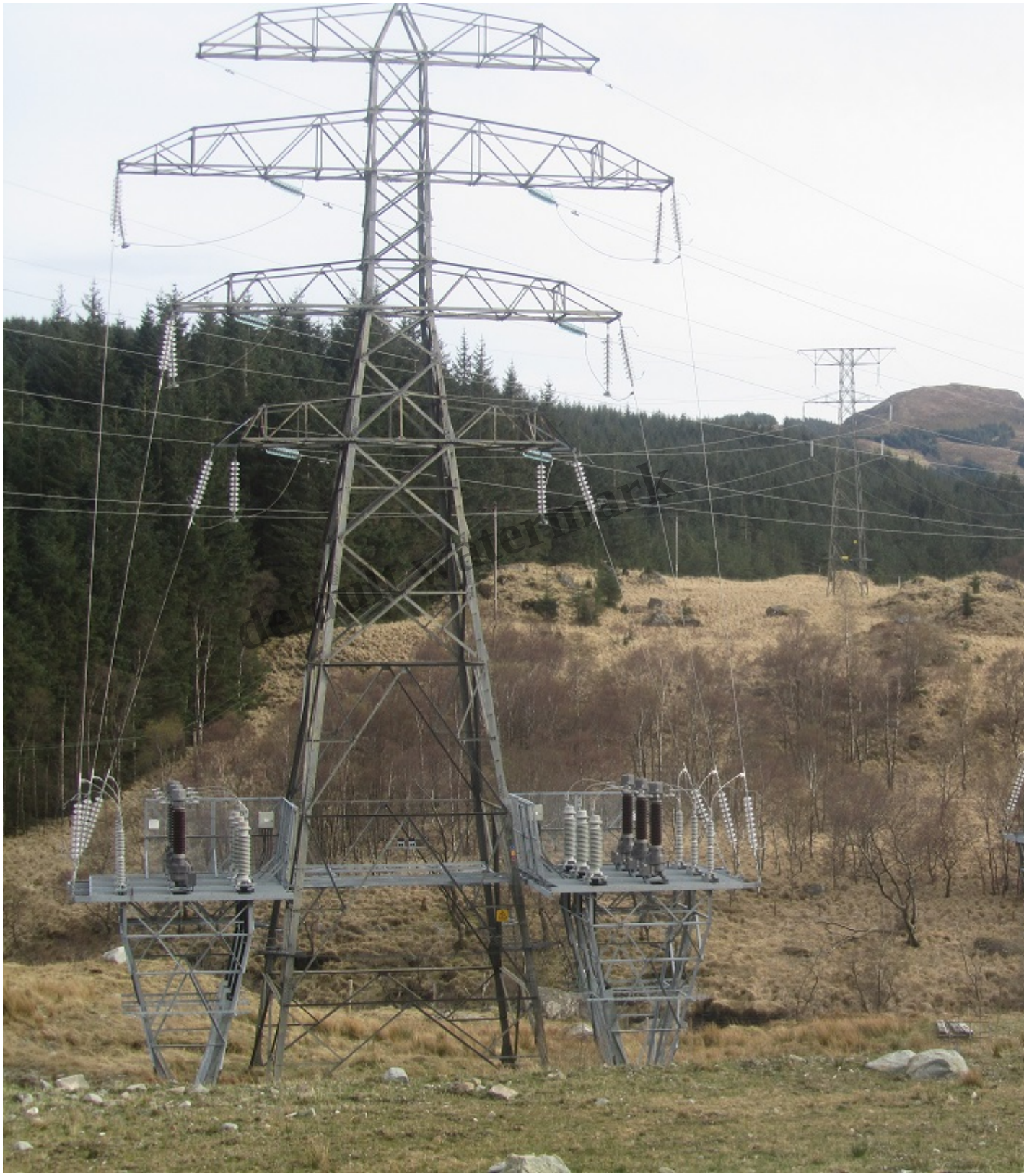
A total of 2.7 km of overhead line will be removed, including 12 steel lattice towers, significantly reducing the quantity of infrastructure that is visible. The removed towers will include those which are seen on the shoulder of Ben Vorlich from the Inveruglas lookout, as well as three large terminal towers around Sloy Switching Station.

The proposals will enhance the character and special qualities of Glen Sloy within the National Park, and have been designed to benefit the maximum number of people, by focusing on a well visited part of the National Park. This will enhance the enjoyment of the landscape and its scenic views, for many people who visit the area.

Glen Sloy track: visualisation (as proposed)

The powerlines in Glen Sloy, which forms one of the main entry points into the Arrochar Alps, have long

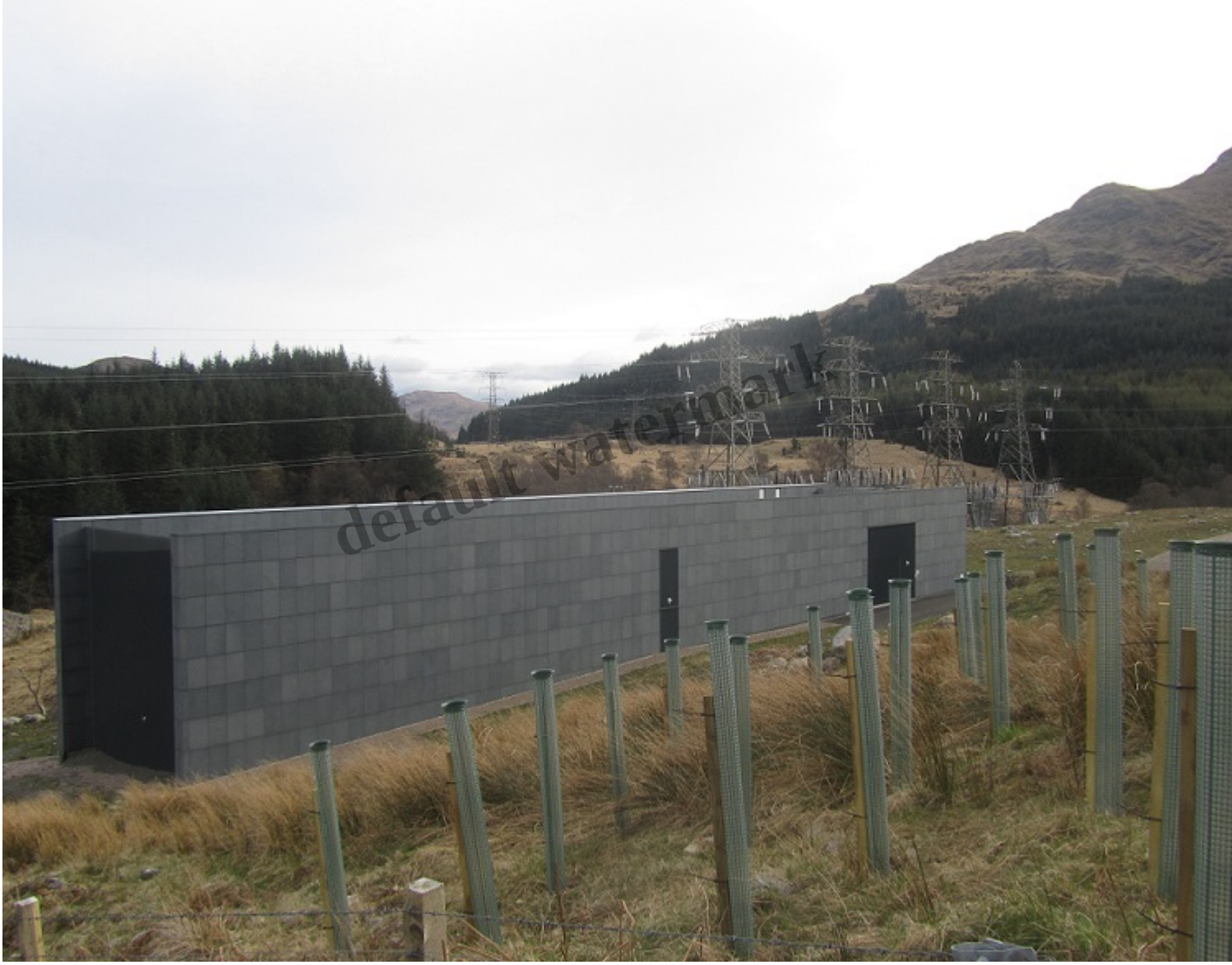
been a blot on the landscape:



Close up of pylons by the new switching station looking south along Glen Loin – the proposals don't further south and then along the edge of Loch Long

Anything that could be done to reduce their impact should therefore be welcomed.

Its only 7 years, however, since the new Glen Sloy electricity sub-station was given the nod by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (see here for planning papers). The old sub-station, where the transformers were in the open, was replaced by a new one, concealed in a new building now described as a “switching station”.



After a paragraph of planning speak:

"The prominent parallel lines and axis of the existing switching station (including its vertical busbars) have been re-iterated in the design of the new building. The north and south elevation (granite rainscreen) is emphasised and will project above, and proud of, the gable elevations (metal louvres) and this will help to ensure that the building does not appear as one solid block. The simple palette of materials that has been chosen takes account of the sensitivity of the setting and assists in ensuring that the building does not unduly compete for attention within its landscape."

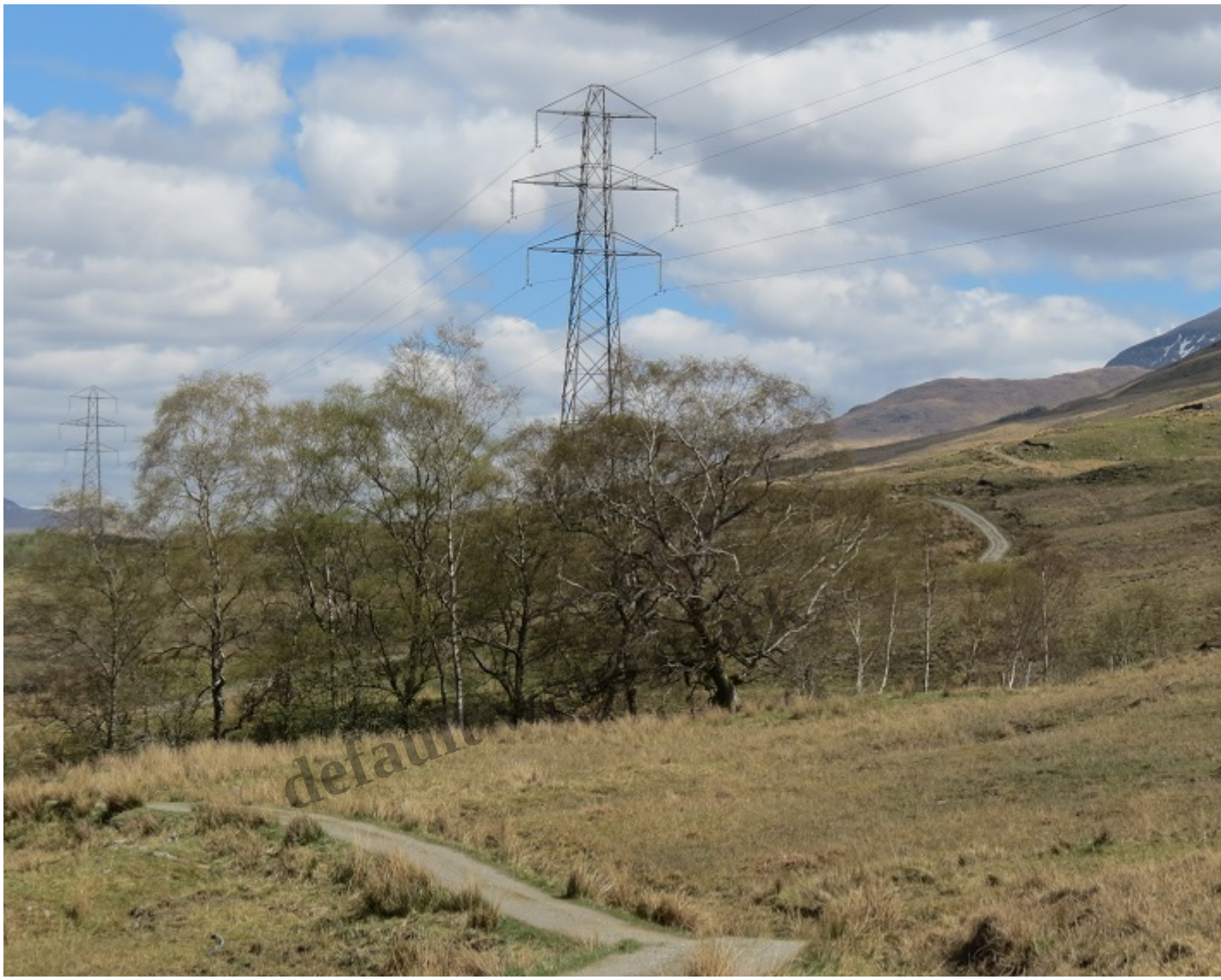
The LLTNPA reached this conclusion about the new building:

"There is no doubt that the finished building will have a presence in its location, however, it is considered that this can be accepted on a number of grounds: as it serves an important and necessary function; provides a better long-term sustainable approach for this function; and provides a well considered and improved response to the design and siting than the existing infrastructure offers".

I don't know about you but I find it hard to imagine any building that could be less appropriate in this landscape? In my view its a National Park endorsed horror. At least someone has retreated from the Park's original conclusion that screening of the building would not be required! The trees that have now been planted will, however, take a long time to make much difference.

The point, however, in relation to the new proposal to remove powerlines is two fold. First, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks spent what must have been a considerable sum of money just a few years ago upgrading the power station which must have involved some work on powerlines which are now to be undergrounded. That is not good use of money. Second, that if the LLTNPA was to take a coherent view of landscape as a whole, we would have avoided a situation where SSEN is damaging the landscape on the one hand and then improving it on the other.

Glen Falloch

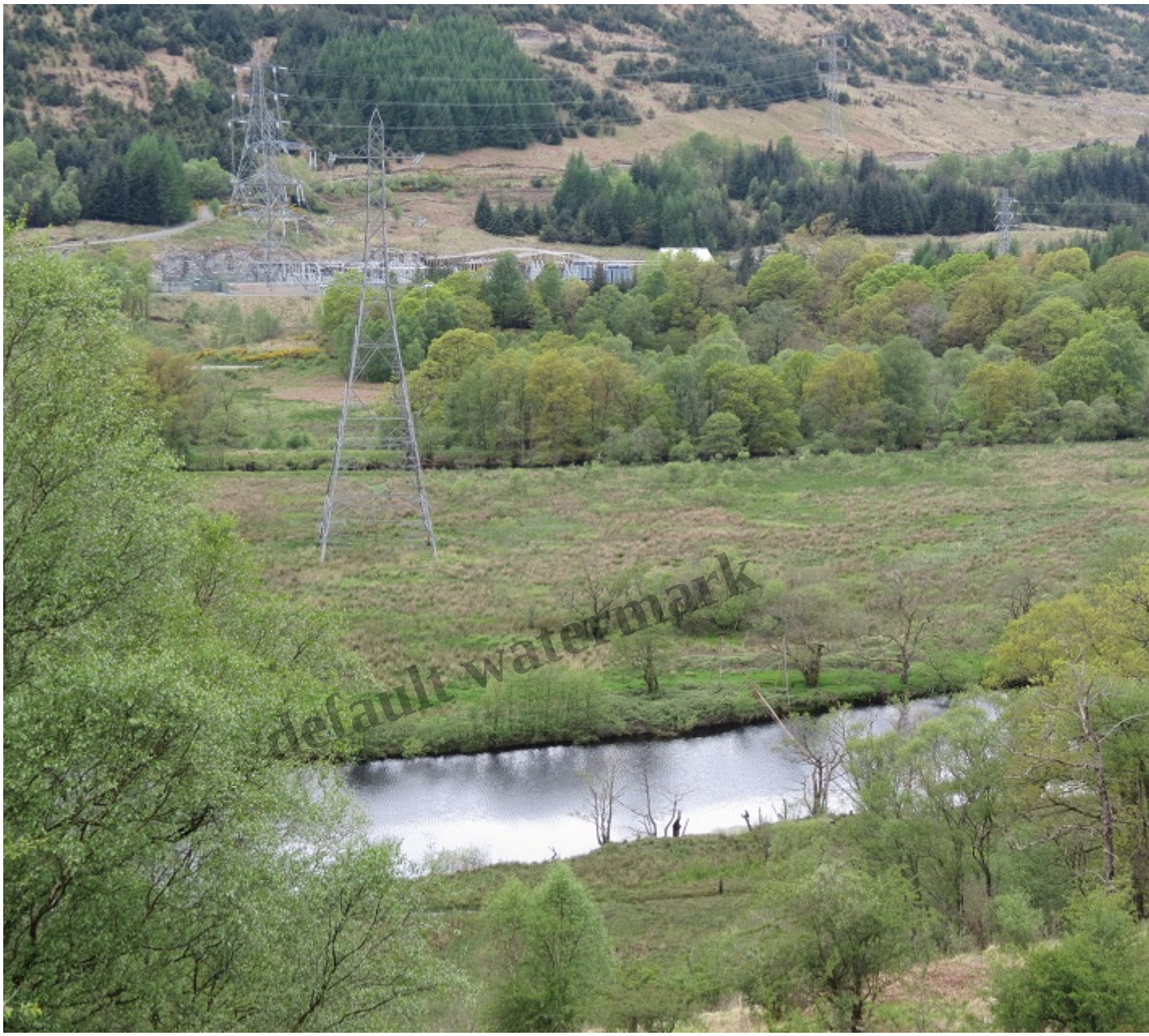


Powerlines above the West Highland Way in Glen Falloch

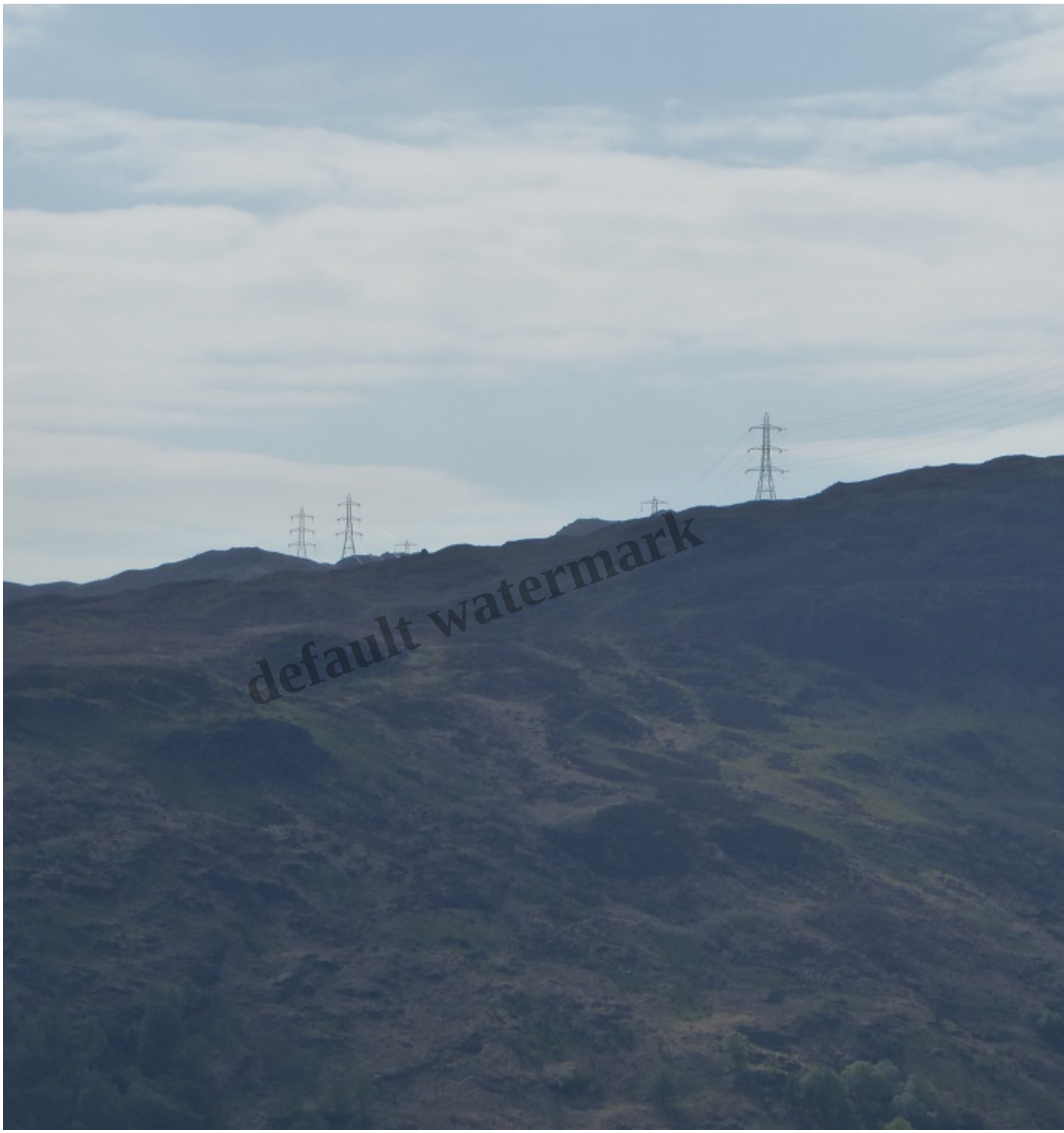
The incoherence of the LLTNPA's approach to landscape is also illustrated by Glen Falloch, where SSEN is proposing to remove the major powerline that runs along the glen.

Again the proposal itself is welcome. The powerline dominates the West Highland Way which is marketed as Scotland's premier walking route and attracts thousands of people each year. Walking under pylons is far from a world class walking experience and I have long thought that any country which cared about quality tourism would have tried to remove them.

In my view, however, the proposal is only a small start. The head of Loch Lomond and bottom of Glen Falloch are dominated by electricity pylons and the substation. What should be, in terms of natural beauty, one of the most special places in the National Park has in landscape terms been despoiled (with conifer plantations also playing their part).

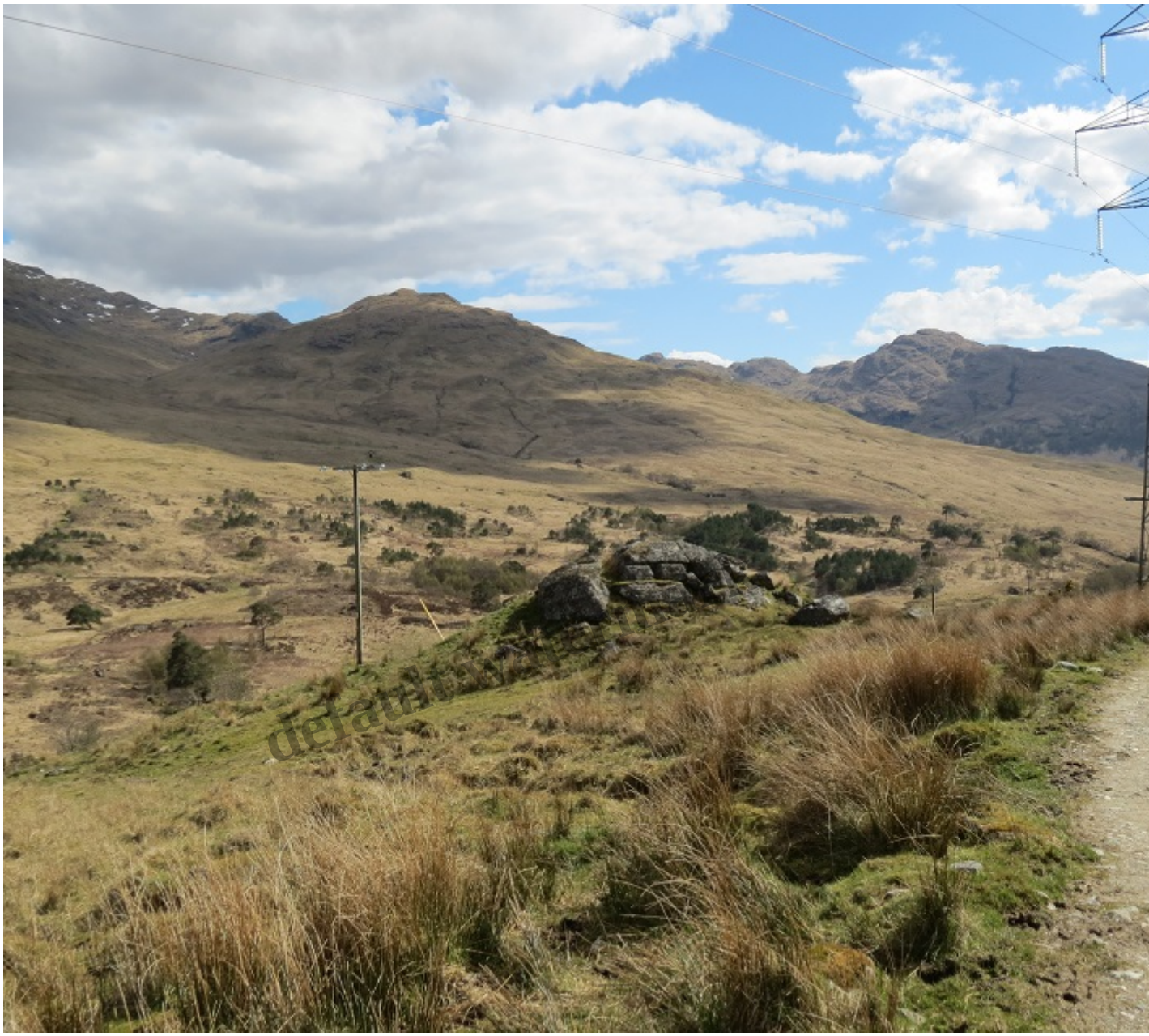


View from West Highland Way south of Ben Glas farm campsite over to the Falloch substation



Powerlines dominate the skyline south of the Eagle Falls

Within this context, its not so long ago, in 2010 that the LLTNPA granted approval for a second 11kv powerline running up Glen Falloch (see here).

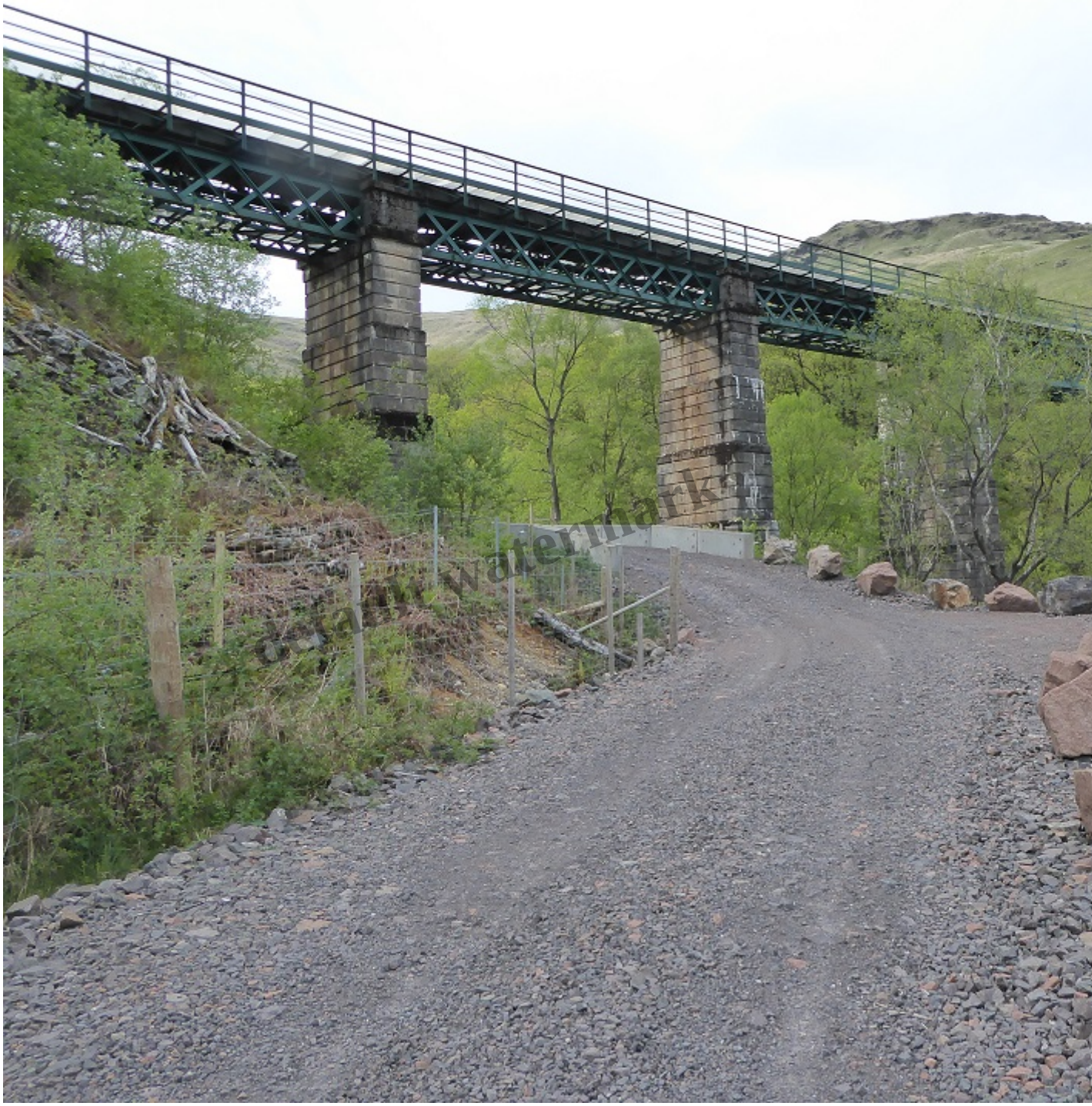


Looking from West Highland Way over to the Glen Falloch native pinewoods, with the “new” powerlin of centre

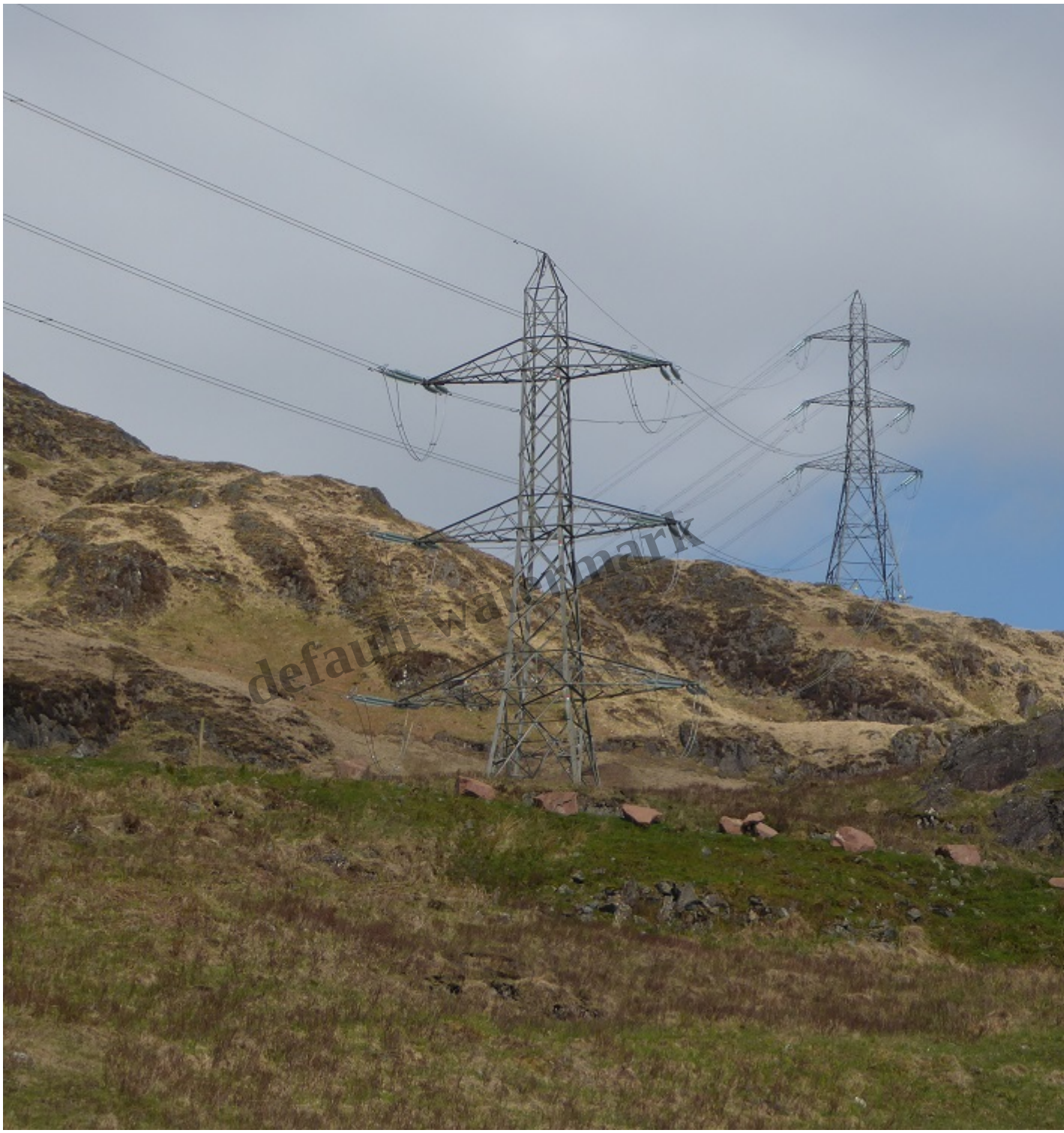
The 11kv powerline has a much smaller landscape impact than the main powerline but it has added to the adverse impacts of powerlines in the glen and would also have been much easier and cheaper to underground than the main powerline (see here). Undergrounding of this new line does not appear to have been even considered by the LLTNPA. Hence we are in a position where, a few years after putting up one powerline, SSEN are taking down another that runs more or less parallel to it.

Ofgem, the regulator of our privately owned electricity transmission suppliers, when announcing the £500m pylon removal fund acknowledged that new transmission lines had been poorly planned but claimed that lessons had been learned and a more coherent approach was now being taken. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be the case around Glen Falloch.

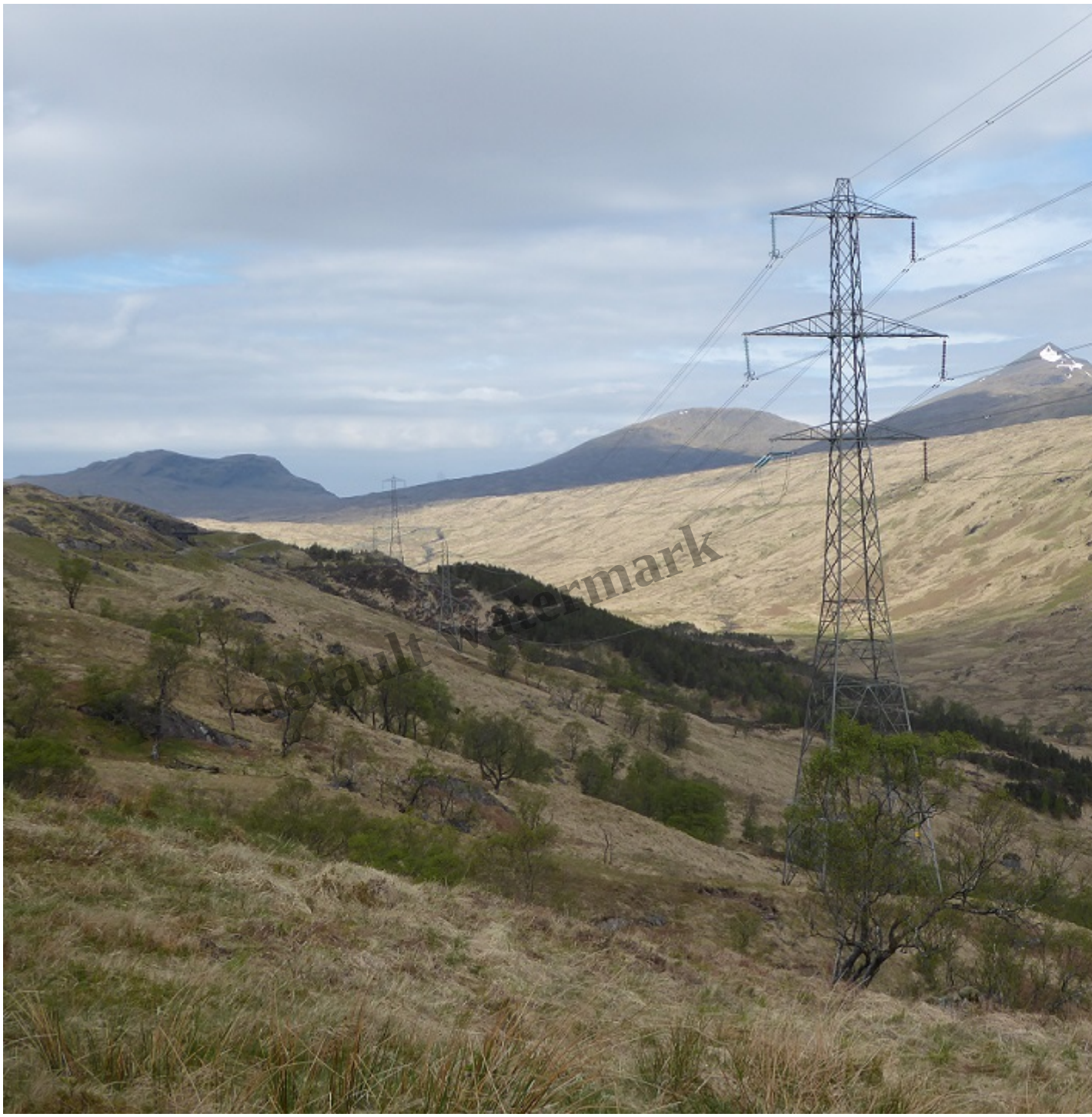
For the last few years SSEN has been “upgrading” the powerline which runs from the Glen Falloch sub-station over to Glen Orchy via Gleann nan Caorainn, the beautiful glen that runs south of Ben Lui and Ben Oss and which forms part of the Ben Lui Wild Land Area. To me, this area offers the greatest opportunity for re-wilding in the National Park although as SNH’s assessment of its wild land qualities states, its marred by hydro infrastructure and powerlines. The point is that instead of seeing the need to upgrade this section of line as an opportunity to remove blots from the landscape, the LLTNPA has simply endorsed ALL SSEN’s proposals:



This new track was granted planning “temporary”planning consent by the LLTNPA to facilitate acces



The powerlines as they head over the shoulder of Troisgeach into Gleann nan Caorainn have a mas



The pylons dominate the landscape of Gleann nan Caorainn and the Ben Lui Wild Land area – Ben

This is a major lost opportunity and an illustration of why the LLTNPA needs to take a much more coherent approach to electricity transmission lines.

The contrast with the CNPA is striking. Their Board strongly objected to the Beauly Denny line and, when they were overruled on this, extracted as a concession that other overhead powerlines in the National Park would be removed. They have made fantastic progress on that, aided by private initiatives such as Wild Land Ltd undergrounding the powerline in Glen Tromie, while the LLTNPA has

shown no inclination to even consider the issues. That, as much as anything, explains why these proposals to remove powerlines in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park have emerged so late in the day.

What needs to happen

I would like to see the LLTNPA take the lead on a consultation on the future of overhead powerlines in the National Park with a view to adopting a long-term strategy on this issue. Such a strategy should seek to ensure that ANY upgrading of transmission lines would result in landscape improvements.

The wider issue, however, is our private electricity market. As statutory undertakers the electricity transmission companies have enormous powers to decide what happens which does limit the ability of our National Parks as planning authorities to control what they do – although the CNPA had demonstrated how much can be done given the will. Without firm guidance, however, it simply doesn't matter to SSEN if one moment they are paid to erect new powerlines and the next someone pays them enormous sums of money to remove them – it all adds to their profitability.

If we are to address global warming, electrical power from renewable resources will become ever more important. That will require not just investment in renewables but continued powerline investment to ensure we can get electricity to the right places. In my view, leaving decisions about such crucial infrastructure to the private market is likely to be just as disastrous as the hydro generation scheme free for all (see here for example). With the declaration of a climate emergency, there is a compelling case for a national investment plan for the generation and supply of electricity. That probably requires re-nationalisation of the graid. An integral part of national plan for electricity should concern the location and design of power stations and supply lines in order to avoid the type of adverse landscape and environmental impacts which have been caused in places such as Glen Falloch and Glen Sloy.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. landscape
2. LLTNPA
3. planning
4. renewables
5. SSE

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