

Environmental damage in Glen Etive and Scotland's planning system

Description



Silt from hydro construction being washed down the Allt Charnan. Photo credit John Sinclair

I have not blogged about the Glen Etive hydro schemes since preliminary construction work started two years ago ([see here](#)). I am afraid I have kept away. I was very pleased, therefore, but also extremely concerned to be sent these recent photos of the Allt Charnan by John Sinclair, a local resident. What you can see in the photo, muddy water, shouldn't happen. A standard condition now for all developments is that mud and silt should not be allowed to enter our river systems.



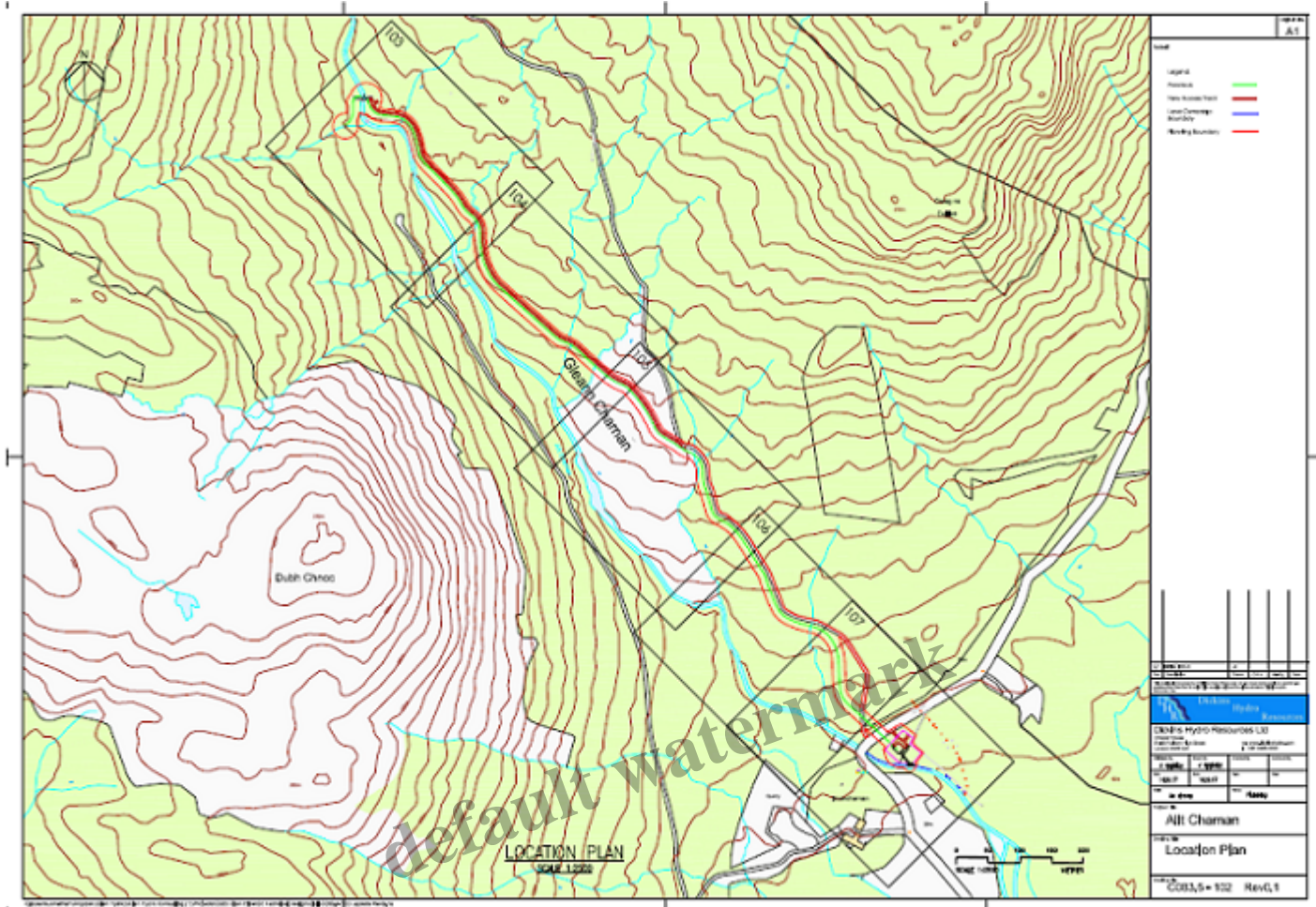
Clear water in a neighbouring burn. Photo credit John Sinclair

As proof that the muddy water has not been caused by recent rainfall, John sent a photo of a neighbouring burn where there is no hydro scheme or associated works.



A condition of the planning permission was that construction traffic should take the forestry road, straight ahead, rather than the single track main road in the lower part of the glen. Ben Starav in background credit John Sinclair

While relatively few people who have visited Glen Etive will know the name, many will know the location: the Allt Charnan is the river under the bridge where the road turns sharply left.



The Allt Charnan is one of seven run of river hydro schemes that were approved in Glen Etive in March 2019. It is one of the four schemes located in plantation forestry on the west side of the glen and because of that received far fewer objections than the three schemes on the other side of the River Etive. A few objectors, however, argued both sides of the glen mattered ([see here](#)) and, having visited the site of the Allt Charnan intake, three years ago I raised a number of concerns about how it could be constructed without serious environmental impacts ([see here](#)).



The Allt Charnan intake is just upstream from the slope on the far side of the river.

The issue I highlighted was that the plans showed a pipeline being constructed across the steep slope on the far side of the Allt Charnan in this photo and I could not see how that could be done. I am not an engineer but it looked a considerable challenge that would require enormous skill and care.



View downstream from the road bridge. Photo credit John Sinclair.

The map of the development suggests the silt could not have come from anywhere except the intake area and John's photos show that the necessary skill and care hasn't been forthcoming.

John has told me he has reported what has been happening to both the Highland Council planners and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). So far, apparently, only SEPA has taken any interest but as yet there has been no sign of remedial or enforcement action. Unfortunately, even where individual staff in our public authorities are concerned about planning conditions being breached, they have their hands tied because of the prevailing ethos which precludes enforcement action.

Our public authorities ostensible policy commitment to protect Scotland's rivers becomes greenwash when they go brown and nothing happens.



View from the southside of the road bridge over the Allt Charnan. The hydro powerhouse is to be located behind the rhododendron on the far side of the river just downstream of bridge. Photo credit John Sinclair.

John also commented on the missing handrail at the road bridge. This reminded me that all road works associated with the Glen Etive schemes were supposed to be completed BEFORE construction started. Indeed on 29th March 2021 the developers claimed on their website ([see here](#)), ostensibly set up to inform people about work on the hydro schemes, that “*all bridge reinforcements on the glen road were complete*”. Clearly that was not true. There have been no posts on the website since.

Planning – Planning Application Documents

18/O2738/FUL | Installation of run-of-river hydropower system, associated plant, buildings and
Land 400M North Of Glenview Glenetive

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Snapshot 22nd December

Information is equally lacking on the Highland Council planning portal. There were supposed to be weekly reports on the Allt Charnan scheme from an Ecological Clerk of Works, paid for by the developer. The last one was over 8 months ago, although whether this is because they have not been produced or because Highland Council has failed to publish them is not clear. The purpose of appointing Ecological Clerks of Works is to prevent environmental damage – such as rivers being filled with silt.

Drainage and Water
Management

Water sampling on the Allt Charnan to be organised.
Twice-daily photographic record of watercourse conditions above the intake and below the powerhouse during construction. Exact locations to be determined and marked by ECoW.

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Extract from ECOW report 5th April

Having checked the reports, it is clear the ECOW was trying to put in place measures to monitor and prevent silt being swept into the Allt Charnan. In theory Highland Council should have in its possession a complete record of what has been happening – photos twice a day – so why no action?

Reading the reports they appear to repeat the same plan week after week and it's not possible for the public to tell from them whether most of the actions recommended by the ECOW were ever implemented or what Highland Council has done about this.

Whistleblowers like John Sinclair who then try and raise concerns are being hamstrung by the lack of public information and bureaucratic paralysis.

John and I disagreed about whether the Glen Etive hydro scheme applications were acceptable in principle or not. But we are both concerned that where such developments do go ahead, they should abide by the highest standards and our public authorities should ensure that happens. Sadly, but only too predictably that has not been happening in Glen Etive. I hope that by helping to publicise what is going on our public authorities may be prompted to act. The wider challenge is how to make the planning system accountable to local communities and the wider public.

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. conservation
2. planning
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