

Glen Etive – the impact of the new hydro tracks on the landscape

Description



Looking up Glen Etive to Bidein from north ridge of Ben Starav: 1 = new All Mheurán access track; 2 = upgraded track from public road to River Etive, access for the Allt Mheurán and Allt Ceitlein schemes; 3 = upgraded track to the Allt Ceitlein power house; 4 = pipeline Allt Gaoirean; 5 = pipeline and upgraded access track Allt Gaoirean; 6 = upgraded forestry road used to access Allt Gaoirean; 7 = upgraded forestry road at start of Allt Charnan, (new track above hidden in trees). 8 = new access track to Allt Fhaoilean.

I had been wanting to visit Glen Etive to take a look at the seven hydro schemes being constructed there since John Sinclair, a local resident, had alerted me to the environmental damage that was being caused before Xmas (see [here](#) & [here](#))

This post takes a look at the landscape impact of the hydro access tracks, which I first considered in

August 2018 ([see here](#)), based on what I saw last weekend.

The current state of play with the Glen Etive hydro construction

All seven hydros granted planning permission in Glen Etive should have been completed by now, a standard condition of the planning consent for each scheme being:

“Construction activities shall be completed within a one year period from the commencement of the development unless otherwise approved in writing by the Planning Authority. All reinstatement works shall be undertaken within three months of completion of all construction work and in accordance with the approved Construction Management Plan and associated Construction Method Statement.”

Work on the Allt Mheuran hydro, for example, started on 1st December 2020, 18 months ago. The various schemes are at different stages of construction with the Allt Charnan appearing almost complete, while at the Allt Chaorainn they are still working on the intakes and the burying the pipeline.



Work on the Allt Chaorainn intake and pipeline viewed from the east slopes of Beinn Ceitlein. Photo

Credit Louise Brimelow

There is no information on the planning portal as to whether Highland Council, as planning authority, has agreed to an extension to the construction period for the various schemes and if so when either the construction or restoration will be complete. This means the landscape impact of the hydros and their tracks may end up less than shown in these photos. On the other hand the delays raise further concerns ([see here](#)) about the competence of the developer, William Dickins, to deliver the consented development and thus how the “final product” may look.

The current impact of the tracks on the landscape

Our walk was over two days, starting and finishing at the bridge near Coileitir, and taking in the five Munros from Ben Starav to Meall nan Eun and Stob Dubh beyond, with an overnight stop on the col between Stob Coire nn Albannaich and Meall Tarsuinn, a fine place to camp. The route gave good views of the access tracks to six out of the seven hydro schemes, the exception being the Allt Chaorainn, the first scheme you see when coming down Glen Etive.



A section of the Allt Chaorainn track, which is supposed to be fully restored in due course, glimpsed from the public road.

The old bridge over the River Etive at Coileitir has been replaced and the road to it (2 in top photo) enlarged to provide access for construction traffic to the Allt Mheurán and Allt Ceitlein schemes.



Looking back up to the start of the enlarged access track

Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell from the information on the planning portal whether this is the finished product or not. Apart from the planning consents for the Allt Mheurán and the Allt Chaorainn, which required the access tracks above the power houses to be fully restored, and that for the Allt Ceitlein, which required the new track above the power house to be reduced to 1.5m width, there is very little in the documentation to specify how the tracks, whether new or enlarged, should be finished. The access track in the photo above, for example, is a problem waiting to happen with the left side poorly finished and nothing to prevent water running down the line of the track and eroding the surface away.



The new track to the Allt Mheuran power house (1 in top photo), in part “floated” over peat bog. The plastic poles on the left, an intrusion into a once wild landscape, mark a section of under-grounded power line.

From a wider landscape perspective, the width of the tracks has a crucial bearing on their landscape impact. I can find nothing in the final planning documentation to indicate whether the new access road to the Allt Mheuran, which I estimated to be over 4m wide, is to be narrowed or not. The Construction Method Statements for some of the schemes on the west side of the glen state that new and enlarged tracks will be restored to resemble existing forestry tracks, without specifying what that is or giving any consideration to their visual impact. Unless the tracks that Highland Council have agreed should remain are narrowed, their visual impact in the long-term is likely to be similar to the photos that follow, whatever the quality of the restoration round about.



Looking across to the Allt Mheuran pipeline and section of construction track that has been removed from the north ridge on Ben Starav. The section of track beyond linking the power house to Coileitir is new and will remain.

One would hope that the final restoration work of the construction track to the Allt Mheuran intake will look better than this but nevertheless it appear the remaining section of access track, c1km long, will now dominate the landscape.



The enlarged track to the Glen Ceitlein powerhouse (3 in top photo) with new access road and bridge over River Etive (2) and start of enlarged/new access track to Allt Mheuran (1) visible in foreground,

The higher we walked, the greater the landscape impact.



View over to the new Allt Bhorain track, Beinn Fhionnlaidh on the right (out of sight in top photo)

The Allt Bhorain track clearly hasn't (yet?) been restored to resemble the existing forest tracks below and to the right of it. Most of the conservation and recreational organisations, including the John Muir Trust and Mountaineering Scotland, only objected to the three Glen Etive hydro schemes on the east side of the glen that are in the Glen Etive Wild Land area. I argued at the time that that was a mistake ([see here](#)) and the wider landscape impact – both sides of Glen Etive are designated a National Scenic – needed to be considered. As we gained height the Allt Mheuran dropped out of sign and it was the visual impact of the hydro tracks on the far side of the glen which provided the main detractors from the “wild land experience”.



The enlarged forestry track (5) leading to the Allt Gaoirean hydro intakes, with a section of restored pipeline (4) visible bottom left. Beinn Sgulaird is on the left and Bidein nam Bian on the right.



The Allt Bhiorain and Allt Gaoirean hydro access track from high on the north ridge of Ben Starav. Beinn Fhionnlaidh, Beinn Sgulaird and Bidein nam Bian in the middle ground.

The existing forestry tracks on the west side of the glen were already quite prominent, but why make the landscape impact worse?



Thankfully there are still some unspoiled views to be enjoyed from Ben Starav but at the summit of Beinn nan Aighenan, a hill which I hold in some affection as it was my final Munro first time round, there was a further shock:



Glen Kinglass hydro tracks, Ben More and Stobinian on the left and Ben Lui on the right

The Glen Kinglass hydro schemes are more remote, at the heart of the Etive Mountains Wild Land Area but much higher up than those in Glen Etive. Clearly being in a Wild Land Area offers little or not protection against developments in our mountains.



The visual impact of the Glen Kinglass tracks is worse than it might be due to little or no attempt having been made to repair the construction damage but however well restored a scar would remain across the hillside. How did government – by which I mean the Scottish Government, local government, NatureScot – allow developers to sandwich what should be one of the finest ridges in Scotland between these hydro track scars?



Stob Dubh left, on the north flank of Glen Ceitlein, with part of the complex winding ridge leading to Meall a Bhuridh right. Buachaille Etive Mor, at the top of Glen Etive is just left of centre.

Raise your eyes, avoid looking down into the glens and look in the right direction and the scenery is still magnificent.



The Allt Ceitlein hydro, still under construction, with the Allt Charnan hydro scheme behind on the far side of Glen Etive viewed from Meall Tarsuinn

Step a little further, lower your eyes and seek out the glens and lower ground and its the hydro tracks which really catch the eye, even in blanket blocks of conifers. We have been left with half a wild land experience.



The Allt Ceitlein and Allt Gaoirean hydro tracks (the latter running along the edge of the plantation) viewed while traversing across from Meall nan Eun to Stob Dubh

Once you return to lower ground, the hydro tracks dominate the landscape. As the Allt Charnan (7) on the far side of the glen disappeared behind Stob Dubh, so the Allt Gaoirean (4) and (5) appeared



The Allt Chaorainn intake – note the vehicles and pipeline yet to be buried – and a section of the access track constructed through granite slabs viewed from the slopes of Beinn Ceitlein

The summit of Stob Dubh, a hill that is rarely ascended compared to its companions around Glen Etive due to its lower height, is an extremely fine viewpoint. While the Allt Chaorainn scheme is tucked away out of site below its steep northern flank, the last of the seven Glen Etive hydro schemes comes into full view:



The Allt Fhaolain hydro track (8) with Bidein behind and Ben Nevis on the horizon

Stob Dubh also gave a bird's eye view – nesting eagles didn't stop the hydro construction – of the Allt Mheuran track:



The permanent new section of access track to the Allt Mheuran with the restored section above

And good views over the forestry around the Allt Gaoirean:



The Allt Gaoirean pipeline and access track in the foreground, with the rest of the track hidden behind the edge of the conifer plantation. The other tracks are for forestry purposes. Beinn Sgulaireid behind.

The fact that forestry tracks have long marred Glen Etive does not seem to me justification for adding more. Rather they illustrate the need for forestry tracks too to come under the planning system and the desirability of continuous cover forestry, as practised on the continent, which would result in most forestry tracks being hidden away behind trees.

A proper National Park for Glen Coe and Glen Etive could have restored over time the past landscape damage that has been in the glen instead of adding to it.

The photographic evidence and the Landscape Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

Highland Council summarised the LVIA conducted by the developer as part of the planning application as follows:

“The LVIA has considered the cumulative effects on the special qualities of the NSA [National Scenic Area] as a result of all seven schemes proposed. The LVIA concludes that the combined construction activity of the seven developments would be limited to a very small part of the NSA in the context of the entire 1000km² and any effects would be localised. Within the localised context of Glen Etive, cumulative landscape effects from construction works would be experienced across a large part of the Glen, and will be significant in places, particularly from the works associated with the Allt Chaorainn, Allt Mheuran and Allt Ceitein schemes which are on the more open glen sides and incorporate construction works along the side of the River Etive. However, as these effects are over a small part of the overall designation, and will be temporary, the overall cumulative impacts on the special qualities of the NSA are not considered to be significant.”

The visual impact of the new hydro tracks don't look temporary to me. To be fair to Highland Council they had their hands tied because SNH (not NatureScot), the public authority responsible for protecting the landscape and wild land areas advised:

- that it agrees with the conclusions of the LVIA's that the effects on the special qualities of the Ben Nevis and Glen Coe NSA will not be significant; and
- it considers that the proposals will have a localised effect on the sense of wildness but will not affect the experience or result in significant effects on the wider appreciation of the WLA or qualities of the area.

My photos suggest that assessment was totally wrong. Walking the south Glen Etive ridge is now a very different and much poorer experience than it was prior to the construction of the hydro schemes.

It was Highland Council staff, not SNH, who as a result of representations by the public forced the developer to agree to restore the tracks between the power houses and the intakes on the Allt Mheuran and Allt Chaorainn schemes and reduce the width of the Allt Ceitein tracks. Unfortunately, however good the restoration, the creation of a significant network of new and access tracks appears likely to have permanently damaged the landscape in Glen Etive, just as it has done in Glen Falloch in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park.

This post has focussed on the visual impact the access tracks associated with the Glen Etive hydro schemes have had on the wider landscape. A number of other adverse impacts were evident from my visit, which I hope to consider in further posts.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
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