

Tracks and the Glen Etive hydro schemes â?? how do we empower the public to become more than powerless spectators?



A week ago Iain Cameron copied me into his

tweet on a track on the Glenure Estate on the eastern side of Ben Sgulaird. He was right, it is monstrous. His tweet has now attracted over 65K views, an indication of the level of interest from people in what is happening to the landscape of the Highlands, with some people asking questions like whether it was connected to the Glen Etive hydro schemes and who were the owners of the estate?

I had seen the track earlier this summer on a walk from Glen Etive to Ben Sgulaird and back over Beinn Trilleachain in June via the Allt Bhiorain hydro scheme, the only one in of the seven in Glen Etive I had not visited. An excuse to blog about both!



On that walk I had seen the same track that Iain recorded. There had been a track here previously and had recently been worked upon (I saw a digger in the distance and should have gone to have a closer look). A comparison with Iain's photos suggests that five months later much of that work has been washed away.

There is nothing about the track upgrade on the Highland Council Planning portal and it appears whoever acted on behalf of the French owners of the Glenure Estate did so without seeking planning permission. Whether 'upgrades' to tracks require planning permission is a grey area in the law but the fact this one has failed so disastrously is a strong argument that it should have been considered through the planning system. Highland Council's Planning Enforcement Charter ([see here](#) page 10) encourages the public to report unauthorised developments and has a form ([see here](#)) for reporting problems. If you want to do so the Grid Reference is NNO 081465.



The Allt Mheuran hydro track Glen Etive

It would be unwise, however, to underestimate the difficulties of getting Highland Council to take any enforcement action when this monstrosity, just over the watershed in Glen Etive, did have planning permission. It is every bit as bad as I and others warned ([see here](#)). One of the problems is Highland Council planning department is so busy approving new developments, such as those for the dozens of telecommunications masts in remote areas, that it does not have time to monitor developments it has approved, let alone enforce conditions.

The Alt Biorainn hydro scheme

Of all the seven Etive hydro schemes ([see here](#) for planning application) I thought that the one that might have least impact would be the one on the Allt Biorainn, the river the curves round the north end of Beinn Trilleachain and joins the River Etive close to where it meets the sea. It is in a forestry plantation and out of sight from the floor of Glen Etive.



View down on the power house from the north ridge of Beinn Trilleachain

It turns out that even though I objected to this scheme I grossly underestimated the landscape impacts. Others were even less critical: the non-governmental organisations who failed to object to the hydro

schemes on the west side of Glen Etive because they were not in a Wild Land Area, the consultants who prepared the visual impact assessments, the planners who considered these and the councillors who took the decision to approve this scheme. Do any of them believe this is acceptable?



The powerhouse was meant to be buried to conceal it from view but is still surrounded by an unrestored construction site which makes it even more visible from afar and from on high.



Glen Etive is meant to be a National Scenic Area. To the shame of Scotland that designation has become utterly worthless as the financial interests of developers are valued far more highly than what what were meant to be our finest landscapes.



New section of track connecting the power house to the forest road network. Note how the side of the track, just beyond the bend, is washing away.

The developer has made almost no attempt to restore the land affected by the construction of the hydro. With industrial forestry plantations having already severely damaged the qualities of the National Scenic Area, more care needed to be taken not less.



Dump by junction forestry road, visible right, new track up to the hydro intake

On my visit there were surplus materials everywhere, apparently abandoned. So much for these schemes contributing to Scotland's circular economy. There was no sign of machinery or any recent work on the site.



The locked gate is an obstruction to our rights of access and is therefore unlawful

The extension of the forest track system up the Allt Biorainn potentially offered a new route over to Ben Sgulaird from Glen Etive, using forest rides above the hydro intake. But why would people want to walk through what is mostly an unfinished building site?



The concrete sides to the intake were unfinished, although the hydro appears to have been commissioned (earning money) and to have been operating before the dry period.



Intake with raised walls to stop the All Bhiorain changing course in flood

There has been very little attempt to landscape the intake – why bother when it is at present concealed by trees and behind a locked gate? The Alt Biorainn is not a true run of river hydro scheme because the intake has dammed the water upstream:



View down flooded area towards the intake past drowned trees

The rise and fall of water behind the intake has already killed some of the trees that had seeded in the space along the river and will eventually kill off the vegetation exposing the peat and releasing more carbon into the atmosphere. That is on top of all the other carbon released into the atmosphere through constructing the scheme in such a remote location.



Looking up Glen Etive from north ridge Beinn Trilleachain, a landscape now scarred by tracks.

The forestry track left middle ground was widened to construct the hydro but would probably have been widened anyway – without any requirement for planning permission – to enable the timber to be harvested. Even if Save Glen Etive had won the hydro battle they would then have faced another and another and another. The whole system is stacked against the natural environment in Scotland and in favour of development interests.

Discussion

On Sunday I was at the Revive Conference in Perth compered, by Chris Packham, who is driven by the fact that the efforts of tens of thousands of people to protect nature have not worked. His argument was that we need to re-think how we campaign if it is not having sufficient impact. There is no point continuing to try and so the same.

The Glenure hill track and the Alt Biorainn hydro scheme are cases in point. Playing a failed planning system simply won't change anything as I argued in my recent post on telecommunications masts ([see here](#)).

One question we might usefully ask therefore is how do we harness the energy and creativity of the 66k people who have looked at Iain Cameron's photos of the Glenure tracks and empower them to be a

positive force for change? What difference could they make to the plans to cover some of Scotland's wildest areas with masts and tracks? Discussion please.

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. hill tracks
2. landscape
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