

Land, climate change and Scotland's planning system – putting people at risk and the solutions

Description



The remains of the house which was flattened by a landslide at Benderloch

Photo from Daily Mirror. The house was destroyed by rockfall not a landslide as such.

This post takes another digression from National Parks to consider what this crushed house says about the failure of the planning system to respond appropriately to the risks posed by climate change.

It took a couple of days but the national tabloids have picked up on the story, first featured in the P & J ([see here](#)), about the couple whose new self-built house was crushed by falling rocks at Benderloch. The narrative in the press is the couple are lucky to be alive, which indeed they are. The untold story is the failure of Scotland's planning system to protect people from natural hazards.

Why are we allowing houses to be built under cliffs?

I have to admit to having aspired at some points in my life to moving to a house with a cliff and hill behind, where I could do some gentle bouldering and fell running from the back door. Building houses directly below cliffs or steep slopes, however, is just not sensible. So why and how did Argyll and Bute

Council ever grant consent for this house to be built?

Unfortunately, while its possible to identify the house – there has been only one planning application to build a new house below Ben Lora in the last five years – Argyll and Bute Council remove all documentation from their planning portal after planning permission has been granted. The only way therefore to understand whether the Council properly considered the risks of building a house in this location would be through a Freedom of Information request.

People have always built houses in dangerous locations, a prime example being active volcanoes which get abandoned after major disasters but then gradually re-colonised until the next eruption. People need somewhere to live and risky land is often cheap.

Cliffs are a bit like volcanoes. While it is certain chunks of rock will fall off at some point, it is difficult to predict when. What the owner of the crushed house said in this case, about there being no known incidents on this site while attributing the rockfall to the action of frost and water, rings true and illustrates the problem.

Historic and Environment Scotland have claimed rockfall is becoming more frequent and have blamed the closure of the Radical Rd in Edinburgh and many of their historic buildings on climate change ([see here](#)). However, there is no historical data from across Scotland to substantiate this and no straightforward scientific explanation for why this might be the case: with fewer frosts, we have less freeze-thaw action, one of the main agents of such erosion, than we had in the past – on lower ground at least.

It is very difficult therefore to determine whether the collapse of part of the cliff in this case was associated with climate change or not. That doesn't mean to say the planners were right to consent to a house being built in such a location – they clearly weren't.

Why are we still allowing houses to be built on raised beaches?

Where we do have good data, however, is on the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the impact this is having and will have on sea-levels. The crushed house was on a raised beach, created as the land gradually rebounded as it was relieved from the weight of the glaciers, and the cliff that fell on it previously marked the shore-line. If Greenland's ice cap melts completely ([see here](#) for media coverage of some of the complexities) sea levels are predicted to rise by 7m, enough to put many of Scotland's raised beaches, including those by the coast at Benderloch, underwater.

What this should tell us is that even if the risk of building a house under a cliff might seem justifiable to some, allowing houses to be built in places that are at risk of rising sea-levels or flooding is completely stupid. So why is the Scottish Government still allowing it to happen?

It appears likely that Britain's insurance companies are ahead of government and the planning system when it comes to the risks. The press reported that the couple had lost everything and a crowdfunding appeal had been launched to help them – individual people are wonderful at helping others.

That raises the question, however, as to why the insurance companies aren't paying? While it is

possible the couple neglected to insure the property but it is also possible they were unable to do so (just like many houses built on flood plains). Our current system is brutal, it allows people to lose everything.

What needs to change

If we had a proper system in Scotland for monitoring and researching landslips and rockfalls, as I have advocated, what has happened in this case would be properly investigated and lessons could be learned. While I hope Argyll and Bute Council may set up an inquiry into what has gone wrong, they are completely strapped for cash and given all the other landslips in their area it is not that likely they will do anything.

This case provides another example of how we need to change how land is used because of natural hazards and climate. We don't just need to end grazing on unstable slopes and plant them with trees, we need to re-think where development happens. The planning system has done that for flooding but not yet for landslips or rockfall.

We also need, however, to enable developments – including houses for people – in places safe from natural hazards while reserving land for nature. That means reforming our system of land-ownership. If you have not read it I would highly commend Andy Wightman's proposals for a "Land for the People (Scotland) Bill" ([see here](#)).

Category

1. Other parts Scotland

Tags

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