

Save our wild Munros and corries – the pumped storage hydro threats escalate

## Description



### The Ardverikie Hill Lochs and Munros

**EARBA 1800 MW**

this very large Pumped Storage Hydro (PSH) is with Scottish Ministers for approval

- it is one of **five 'new wave' mega-PSH schemes** in the Highlands
- these are examined here for their upland landscape 'fit'
- how does Earba compare? *not at all well ...*

yes, Scotland must urgently meet climate targets  
yes, surplus green energy must be saved - including pumped storage  
yes, local communities matter just as much as the hillgoing community  
but - we can Save Our Munros - and cherish our hill lochs - too

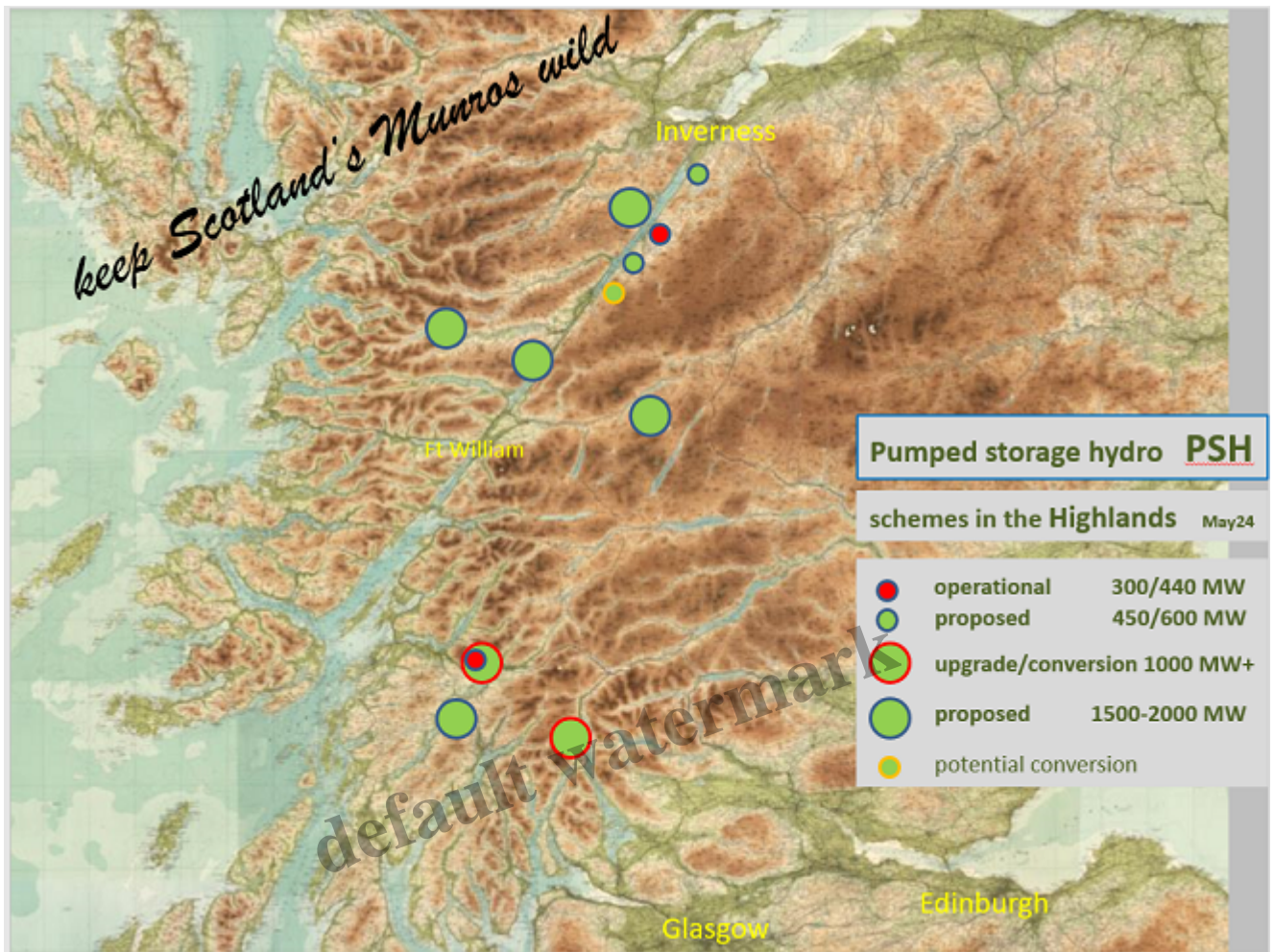
No corrie will be safe, no classic Munro round will remain sacrosanct, if they approve "**Earba**". This is the developers' secretive codename for a mega-pumped storage hydro scheme (PSH) which is with the equally secretive Energy Consents Unit to fast-track under some barely-accountable Energy Minister's pen in amongst a sheaf of routine death warrants for our mountain heritage. Is this hyperbole? Read on and decide. Act, even.



**this overview conveys the enormous, unprecedented scale of this ambitious scheme**

- the unified "Loch Earba", raised by 21 m, is over half the length of Loch Laggan
- formerly slender, it is doubled in width (at the waist), with unnaturally high shorelines
- the existing hill loch, already the largest in the area, is hugely expanded with a dam bulging out well beyond the natural mountain front – its water level raised by 70 metres
- a permanent access roadway will zigzag across the flank of one of the Three Munros, and cross the high col between the other two

“Ardverikie” might ring more of a bell – the Ardverikie Three for sure, and what I am terming the Ardverikie Hill Lochs, to get a bit more cut-through than Lochan na h-Earba (what a mouthful) or Loch a’ Bhealaich Leamhain (can I ever spell that right, let alone remember it?). Oh, and Monarch of the Glen, and film locations such as Mrs Brown.



The three slides here are from David's powerpoint – highly recommended [Ed].

My powerpoint ([see here](#)) draws together Scotland's existing and proposed PSH catalogue, perhaps for the first time. You might think this simple map would be upfront on some Holyrood website, but no, promote brave and commendable policy goals for racing to carbon-neutral while keeping the sacrificial lambs, lochs, and glens well hidden, buried under barrowloads of impenetrable box-ticking content-free planning documentation [196 documents to date ([see here](#))].

Here can I bend a knee to Nick for his 'born rebel' dogged perseverance in ferreting out all the stuff that threatens our National Parks and wider. And one or two other hound-dogs. Because, like most of you – like most of us – I would far rather be out up in the hills, or delving into pleasant spin-offs like placenames and birdlife, than drudging through Appendix 7.27 or writing letters of objection that will carry no more weight than their 5 KB. Only by getting dragged kicking and screaming to camp on the shores of a mere faint name of a loch never previously glimpsed let alone visited have I found myself..... defending it? And all the rest.

## THE BIG FIVE

What my ppt shows is that we have an entirely new wave of mega-PSH breaking on our rocky hill-shores. To give an idea of scale, there are only two operational schemes – Foyers at 300 MW and Cruachan, well-known as the Hollow Mountain tourist attraction – 440 MW and heading for upgrade to

1040 MW with no change to its reservoir size.

The Big Five proposals over 1000 MW include **Coire Glas** – where? I didn't even know till last month, above Loch Lochy – already consented and in progress. Although it will sit below one of the Lochy Munros, it fits inside a bleak trough and doesn't interfere with the usual ways up the mountains. It attracted minimal objections.

Two more schemes are in rugged, little-visited moorland but far removed from corries and bens – Earrach above Loch Ness and Ballimeanach above Loch Awe.

But two are crudely plonked right in the bosom of classic Munro rounds, and destroy lovely hill lochans, not to mention blocking or blitzing historic hill paths:

- **Fearna** – (in scoping) another secretive codename, a pretty wee tarn on a shelf above the vast **Quoich** hydro scheme – dominating the Gleouraich-Spidean Mialach round and blocking the return route;
- **Earba** – breaks new ground (drowns it?) in not using a large loch such as Ness or Awe as the lower reservoir, but damming a through-glen twin-loch at either end, essentially writing off a lovely valley with its prime wild camping and swimming spots (and drumming snipe at dusk for company).

The developer of both proposals – Gilkes of Kendal, until now the promoter of Run-of-River (Death-of-River?) schemes a hundred times smaller, takes magic thinking to surreal heights describing them as 'sensitively designed to fit their settings', with artists' impressions as if they were sleek Italian sports cars, casually omitting the often more intrusive industrial-scale access roadways, stark dam crests, and daily draw-down to near-empty. These will never be pretty sights – and will sit there until the next ice age comes along.

## **SACRIFICES : NECESSARY – OR CULT ?**

We hillgoers and lovers of the wilds nearly all admit that burning off the Earth's stock of precious hydrocarbons in a blip of geological time, just to keep taxes down and airfares to the sun cheaper than bus tickets (true, this month, Berlin-Edinburgh 14 euros, Strathblane-Stirling £14), might need a sacrifice or two. And – our own magic thinking – if we let these Big Five get the nod, the climate gods will be appeased. Dream on, follow the money, follow the electricity bills and aviation fuel duties, follow the votes.....

The demands on our mountain heritage are actually insatiable – so long as there are vast profits to be made in supplying endless power to the electorate – and the tech giants: the bulk of Ireland's energy consumption will soon be by massive data storage centres (a European-scale one is planned for Blyth, Northumberland – so handy for Scotland's greenergy). And quite how exporting wind, rain, and topography to England and beyond actually benefits the Scottish economy, I have yet to see, you can't stick tariffs on it at the border, and the planning permissions are free. Job creation – trivial. Sounds good though – the Energy Economy.

Indeed given the Royal Society dismisses ([see here](#)) PSH as a poor option ( with uncalculated carbon releases to build them) and advocates hydrogen storage, for which caverns abound in England, we will probably be incentivising greenenergy developers to invest in Scotland, not taxing them.

Let us just recall the huge sacrifices already made. Every single one of the great ‘Western Glens’ has a major trad hydro dam, from the Garry up past Cluanie and Affric and Mullardoch and Monar to Ross-shire and Sutherland. The losses of natural lochs, best wildlife spaces, glen habitations, access to hills, all hardly bear thinking about (so we don’t). Now we are still reeling from the spate of Run-of-River schemes, trivial amounts of megawatts for often horrific destruction, never properly restored, community wind(water)falls withheld as suddenly unaffordable (Etive, a glen we will never bear to revisit). I recently had to Google-fly the major ravines of the NW Highlands – a search process made easy by the hydro track scars.

Not to mention wind – the entire Monadhliath, that unsung quiet back country of so many intricate pleasures, changing moods – devastated. Not by government fiat or expropriation as with the Big Hydro schemes – wind and hydro are now entirely landowner and developer-led, creating highly-marketable gold-plated guaranteed-income long-life capital assets to augment investment portfolios, or flog.

## WHEREVER NEXT?

Given Scottish Ministers’ gung-ho attitude to greenenergy, Earba and Fearnna will almost certainly be waved through, two more glorious places off-limits for a decade of construction, never to be revisited. But that will not be it. There exists a secret list – ‘commercially confidential’ – of we don’t know how many alternative locations, supposedly showing that only these two sites fit the bill, but more likely the next to come forward. Follow not just the money but the power lines – Beaully-Denny, and then every spur to Skye or the north-west.

No corrie will be sacrosanct. Whether for pumped storage, or routine hydro – how many serene hill lochs have been tamed and even raised with weirs for supposed Run-of-River?

After visiting Ardverikie, I took a hike up Coire Ardair and onto the swelling Meagaidh range. This is a National Nature Reserve, owned by us. Just as we own, via The Forestry, sites such as Gleann Cia-aig (Arkaig) ([see here](#)) and Affric ([see here](#)), crudely exploited for Death-of-River, actually some of the worst schemes we have seen. I began to imagine the unthinkable – Scottish Ministers dictate to NatureScot that it must promote vast Coire Ardair for a scheme like Cruachan and Coire Glas – because NatureScot ought to be ‘saving the planet’ not to mention boosting public funds.

## Category

1. Other parts Scotland

## Tags

1. camping
2. conservation

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4. Local communities
5. NatureScot
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