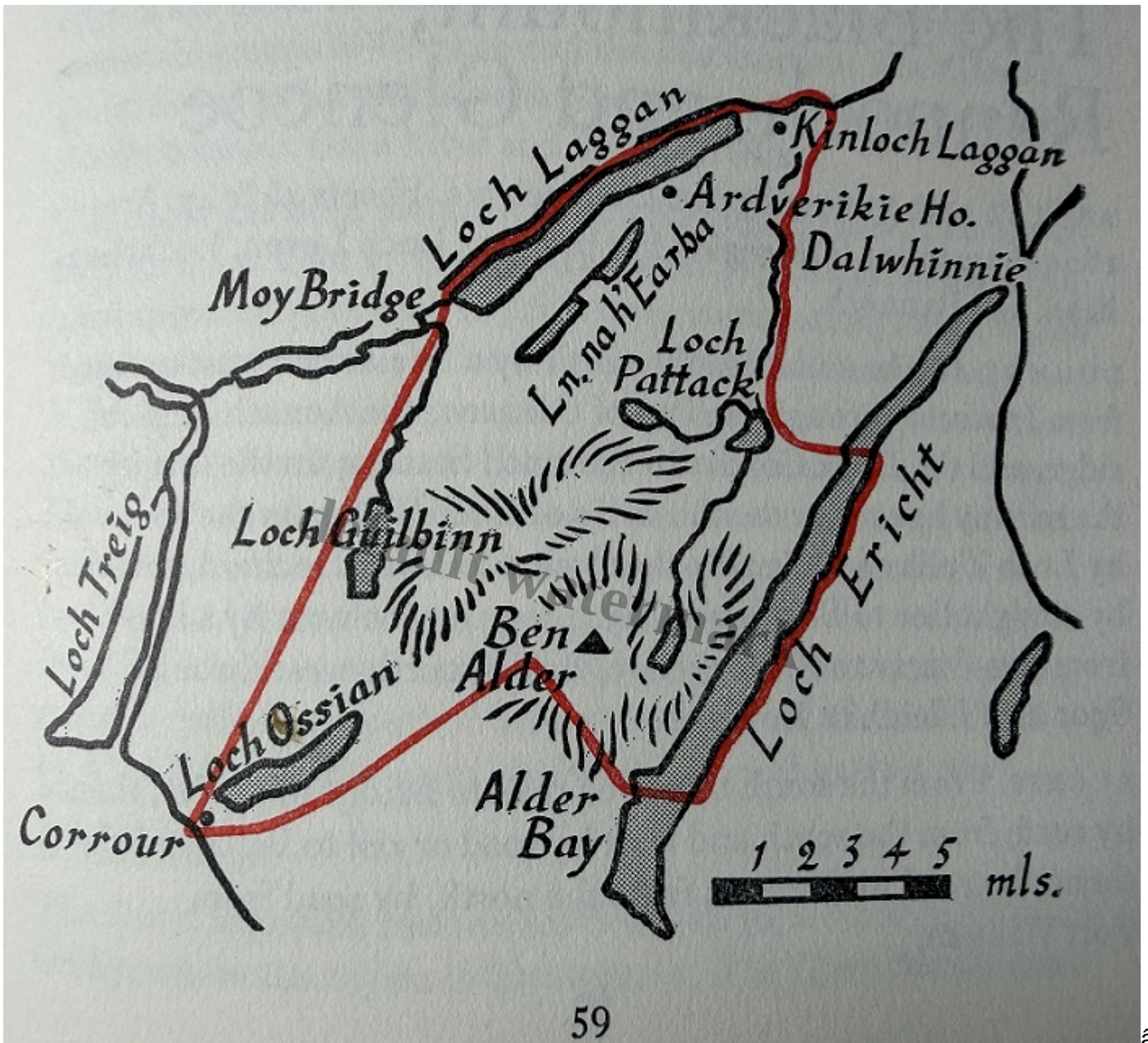




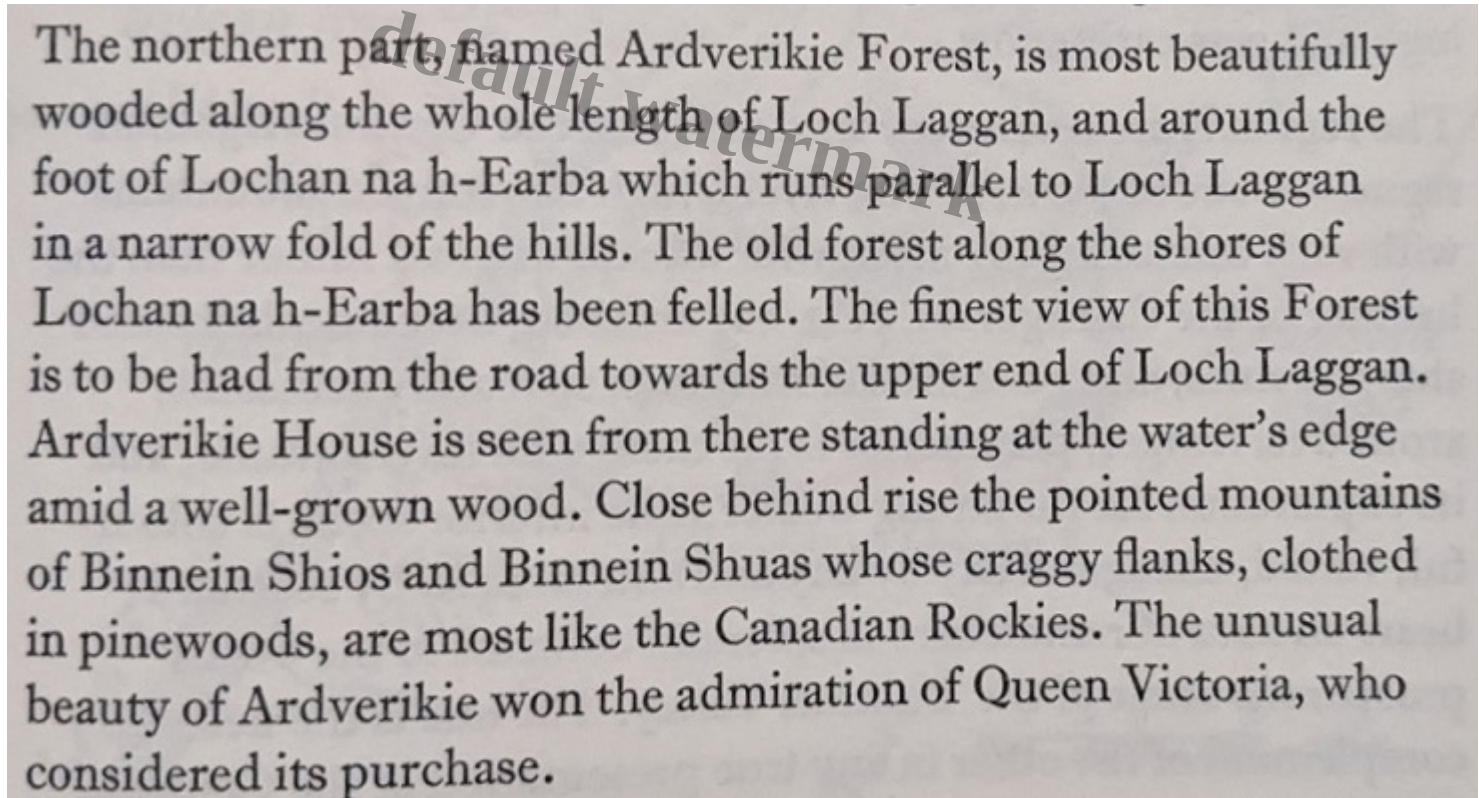
This region represents every wild aspect of the Central Highland scene â?? wooded lochs, strong rivers, high flat-topped mountains with rock corries deeply inset, wide sweeps of grass rather than the heather of the Cairngorms, peat-hag and bog, broad bealachs and sharp ravines, and good tracks.â??

So wrote Bill Murray, in his 1962 *Highland Landscape*, describing the Range of Ben Alder â?? which stretches from Loch Laggan in the north to Alder Bay on Loch Ericht in the south; and from Loch

Ossian in the west to Kinloch Laggan in the east. Nearly all of Murray's suggested areas of outstanding landscape value went on to become National Scenic Areas.

However several were rejected, and the most notable of these was the Range of Ben Alder itself. Why was it left out when the Scottish Government finally agreed to bring forward National Scenic Areas (NSAs) between 1978 and 1980? I have written elsewhere that buried somewhere in the archives of Nature Conservancy for Scotland and Countryside Commission for Scotland we'll find evidence to show that strong economic and political pressures came to bear, because of the huge hydro electric interests related to smelting aluminium in Kinlochleven. Whilst most of this had been completed by 1980 the potential for more would have been seen sufficiently tempting to disallow this potential NSA.

You'll see at the centre of the small diagrammatic map from Bill Murray's work and the description, that Loch na h-Earba was included in what could (should?) have become a National Scenic Area.



The northern part named Ardverikie Forest, is most beautifully wooded along the whole length of Loch Laggan, and around the foot of Lochan na h-Earba which runs parallel to Loch Laggan in a narrow fold of the hills. The old forest along the shores of Lochan na h-Earba has been felled. The finest view of this Forest is to be had from the road towards the upper end of Loch Laggan. Ardverikie House is seen from there standing at the water's edge amid a well-grown wood. Close behind rise the pointed mountains of Binnein Shios and Binnein Shuas whose craggy flanks, clothed in pinewoods, are most like the Canadian Rockies. The unusual beauty of Ardverikie won the admiration of Queen Victoria, who considered its purchase.

Murray left areas that had been disfigured by hydro schemes out of his proposed boundaries, including Loch Treig from the Range of Ben Alder.

National Scenic Areas have since become the quiet and unassuming designation which has served Scotland surprisingly well. To date there have been no major intrusive developments allowed for instance no wind farms within NSAs. And the controversial clauses in National Planning Framework 4 which allowed development in Wild Land Areas specifically excluded NSAs and National Parks. Quite right too.

However, this leaves us with questions prompted by the blog from Dave Morris ([see here](#)). What would have happened had the Range of Ben Alder been adopted as a National Scenic Area in 1978 / 1980?

Why has this question not been revisited in the 46 years since the NSAs were designated? Is it too late for Lochan na h-Earba?

I was in Highland Council last week speaking to planners from across the north of Scotland about the history of the NSAs. As part of the day, we had a field trip to look at some of the local landscape designations, protecting the landscape quality of Loch Ness. I was asked â?? â??Could Loch Ness become an NSA?â?? It was not an impertinent question. Stood on the shore at Dores looking down the length of the Great Glen on a sunny summerâ??s day, it is astonishing that such magnificence doesnâ??t have landscape protection at the level of national significance.

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Like Lochan na h-Earba, Loch Ness and the steep hills alongside, heading down the Great Glen, are threatened by the two massive pump storage schemes mentioned in Dave Morris's blog. The striking scene of Meall Fuar-mhonaidh (696m high) will be altered by a new dam. And from the same standpoint at Dores, you'll be able to see the massive dam approved for the Loch Lochy pump storage scheme reflecting the morning sun beneath Ben Tee.

All three of these schemes now have approval and government backing though none has been before a planning committee. It leaves us with the questions Dave Morris is asking, along with the thought whether any would have been allowed had NSA designation been given 45 years ago. I ended my conversation with the planners from the Highlands by asking them where they thought a new (or several new) NSAs should be designated. They seemed quite enthusiastic that Loch Ness should be the 41st NSA in Scotland. That would be a tremendous way of celebrating their 50th birthday. Perhaps there is hope yet.

[Bob Reid is the chair of Action to Protect Rural Scotland <https://aprs.scot/> and former President of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland]

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