

Pumped storage & planning â?? the Coire Glas & Lochan na h-Earba hydro schemes

Description



Looking west along the fine ridge to Sron â?? Chaire Ghairbh, Meall na Teanga on the left.

Following David Jarmanâ??s highly informative 2024 powerpoint comparing the impacts of the various pumped storage hydro (PSH) schemes being proposed for Scotland ([see here](#)), I have been to look at Coire Glas, the site of SSEâ??s proposed scheme above Loch Lochy, twice in the last eighteen months. The first time was on a walk up Ben Tee, a prominent Corbett, by the most popular route; the second time a few weeks ago along the unfrequented east ridge leading to the Munro Sron â?? Chaire Ghairbh.



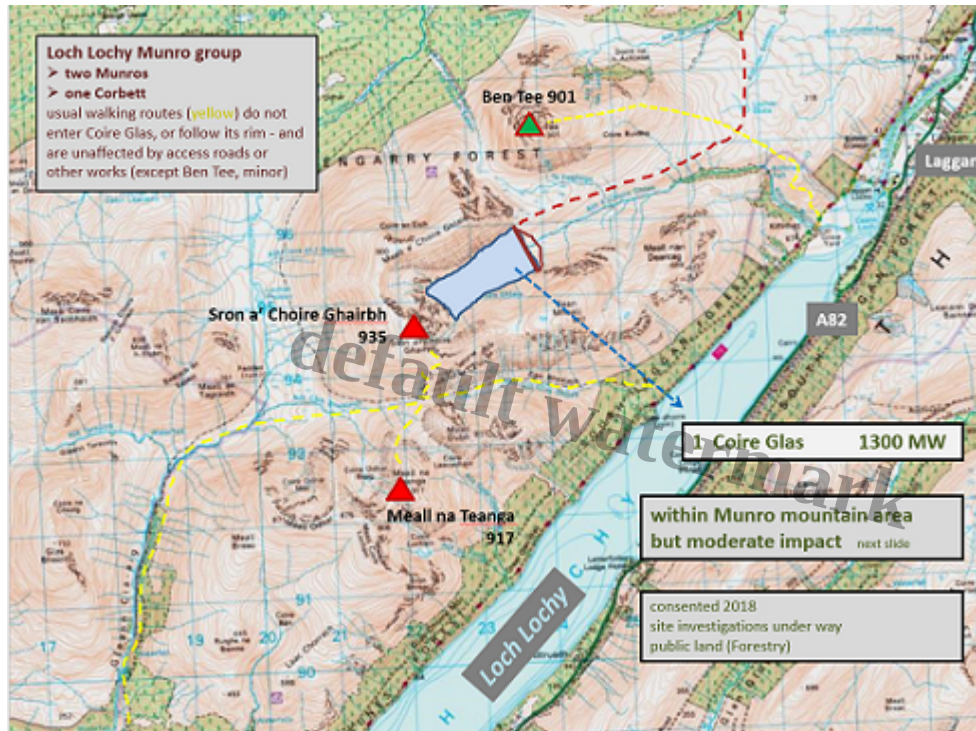
Ben Nevis from Sean Mheall, one of the tops on the east ridge of Sron aâ?? Choire Ghairbh

There is no doubt these hills are beautiful and, on a fine day, the views in all directions are stunning because the summit areas are higher than the neighbouring ground.



View west from summit of Sron aâ?? Choire Ghairbh to Loch Quoich and the Cuillin beyond. Spidea Mialach, the Munro to the right was the proposed site of the Fearna PSH scheme, now abandoned. The scar is from the large 2021 landslip ([see here](#))

The Coire Glas PSH, however, is tucked away and my visits confirmed that David Jarman was right to argue its impact on this landscape would be limited compared to the proposed PSH scheme at Lochan na h-Earba ([see here](#)).



Map from David Jarmanâ??s slide show

There are two major reasons for this. The first is the proposed dam for the upper reservoir is located near the top of a 4km long glacial trench. It would be shielded from view from the lower ground and most of the neighbouring hills.



Looking up to Coire Glas along the glacial meltwater channel from above the Kilfinnan falls. Note the native woodland along the gorge and the invasive Sitka (left and right foreground).

The views that would be most affected are those from the horseshoe ridge around the coire and the summit of Ben Tee:



Looking into Coire Glas from the summit of Ben Tee, with the east ridge of Sron aâ?? Choire Ghairbh running along the far side of the glacial trench.. The grey marks the approximate position of the 90m high dam wall.

Walking along the east ridge of Sron aâ?? Choire Ghairbh, there were only occasional views down into the coire until I reached the narrow upper part of the ridge. Most hillwalkers approach Sron aâ?? Choire Ghairbh by the fine stalkers track to the south (the yellow line on Davidâ??s map) and will not see the dam or reservoir until close to the summit.



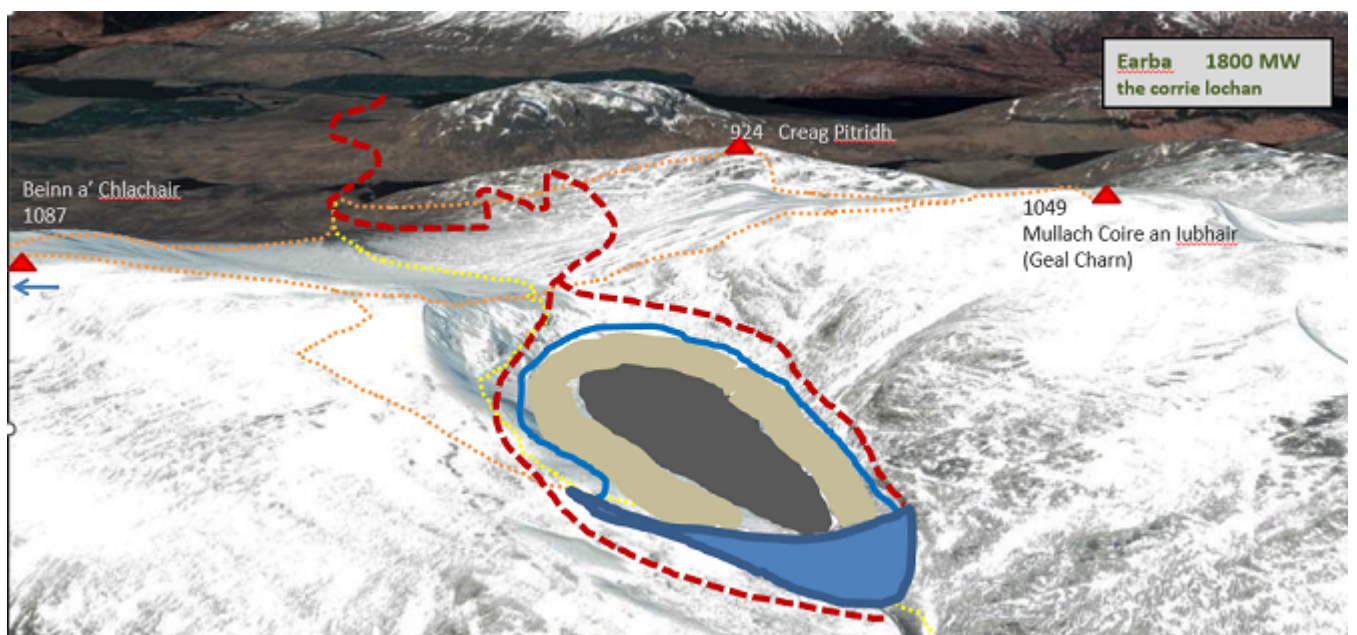
The stalkers path up Sron aâ?? Chaire Ghairb with Coire Glas on the far side of the skyline

There is no doubt, however, that the view down into the glacial trench from the summit rim would be totally changed and that when the reservoir has been emptied, as it could be each day, there is no avoiding the fact that the drawdown scars would look horrific.



The view down into Coire Glas, from near the summit, and along Loch Ness beyond

Hillwalkers would either need to get up early, when the reservoir is most likely to be full, or look the other way. Nevertheless the visual impact would be far more limited than the reservoir for the Lochan na h-Earba scheme. That would be visible for much of the ridge between Geal Charn and Beinn a' Chlachair, while the dam would also be visible from Carn Dearg opposite, Ben Alder and the Drumochter hills beyond.



Dotted red lines = access tracks as proposed 2024. Map credit David Jarman.

A further significant difference in the visual impact of the two schemes is that the access track to the the upper dam for Lochan na h-Earba would cross the high Bealaich Leamhain, between Geal Carn and Beinn a Chlachair, and then descend to the loch of that name whereas the access track to the Coire Glas dam would be from below and on much lower ground.



Restoration of the temporary access track, constructed around the east side of Ben Tee in 2023, for site investigations in Colre Glas

SSE's recent record on site restoration in respect of powerlines may not be good, ([see here](#)) and ([see here](#)), but, if properly supervised there is no reason why they shouldn't do as good a job as they have done restoring the temporary access track into the coire.



View down to the forestry track which would provide access to the scheme from Loch Garry to the north. The proposed route passes very close to Caledonian pinewood remnants that the Forestry Commission suffocated with commercial forestry

Moreover, because of the differences in altitude of the access tracks, there should be opportunities to lose the access route to Coire Glas in regenerating native woodland in the medium to long-term. All that requires is for Forest and Land Scotland, who owns the land, to cull deer and weed out the regenerating Sitka. With the same planning authorities involved in both cases and the land at Coire Glas in public ownership, the long-term landscape impact of the access track at Coire Glas should be far less than Earba.



Photo montage credit, David Jarman

The second major reason why the impact of Coire Glas scheme would be far less than Earba is that Loch Lochy, which contains a vast quantity of water, would be used as its lower reservoir. By contrast at Lochan na h-Earba, the two existing lochs would need to be joined and raised by 32m to store sufficient water. The impact of drawdown scars on the landscape and ecology of Lochan na h-Earba will be horrific whereas Loch Lochy is so large that drawdown will be invisible and any ecological impacts localised.



Diagram of the Coire Glas scheme showing how most of it would be underground.

Apart from the upper dam, the access track and the entries to the various shafts and tunnels, the whole of the Coire Glas scheme will be underground, following the model at Cruachan, whereas Earba would include:

- two further dams at either end of Lochan na h-Earba and associated access tracks;
- “a surface building which would contain an overhead crane and other facilities including offices, storage, transformers and other equipment”;
- open viaducts along the flanks of Binnein Shuas and Creag Pitridh to channel water into Lochan na h-Earba (that is not an issue at Loch Lochy which is fed by a large number of sources)



Spoil from the investigatory tunnels for the Coire Glas scheme.

Under-grounding creates challenges of what to do with the spoil and only some will be able to be re-used in the construction of dam in Coire Glas. According to the Coire Glas PSH website ([see here](#)) SSE has invested over £100 million so far to progress Coire Glas and “site investigations have included the excavation and completion of a major 1.2km-long exploratory tunnel built into the hillside above Loch Lochy”..with over 90,000 tonnes of rock and earth excavated. It appears that so far no final solution has been agreed for its disposal/re-use, with the spoil currently forming a blot on the landscape, although there have been discussions about removing excess rock by barge, a more environmentally friendly method than lorries.

By contrast the Earba scheme appears to be excavating less material and can re-use more above ground because of the extent of the development which is on the surface: their documentation implies they believe they can re-use all the spoil. That appears to be the one thing that can be said to be in favour of the Earba scheme.

Discussion

In June the UK regulator, Ofgem, gave the provisional go ahead ([see here](#)) to three PSH schemes in Scotland: Coire Glas, Lochan na h-Earba and Loch Kemp above Loch Ness along with other energy storage schemes. In our privatised energy market, it is left to private interests to decide WHERE to back developments like PSH and ultimately WHETHER to invest. Their investment decisions are made on the basis of their likely profits after taking account of the impact of the UK Government's cap and floor regime on energy prices which guarantees minimum prices but also caps maximum charges.

The finances are still under negotiation between the UK Government and the developers in respect of PSH schemes and, while the Scottish Government has granted planning consent for both the Coire Glas and the Earba schemes, it is still not certain either will go ahead. As SSE puts it on their Coire Glas website: "Any final decision to progress the project would be taken in line with SSE's continued focus on capital discipline and with strict adherence to its return thresholds."

Unfortunately, both the UK nor the Scottish Governments are far concerned that PSH schemes and other renewable energy developments go ahead than their impacts which are determined by where they are located. This post has deliberately avoided using all the normal planning jargon and referring to planning considerations like designations and purely considered these two schemes in terms of their impacts. From this perspective, if we need PSH, Coire Glas looks an appropriate place for such a scheme whereas Earba does not, yet the Scottish Government has approved both.

Nicola Sturgeon's wind-farm legacy is damaging Scotland

ON land and sea, no other First Minister has done more damage to Scotland's economy and environment than Nicola Sturgeon. Your report of her failure to secure adequate financial benefits from offshore wind-farm development ("Billions worth of investment money at risk over 'weak' penalties for Scot Wind firms", The Herald on Sunday, October 11), is matched on land by her disastrous manipulation of planning policy for wind-farm development.

One week before she resigned, the Scottish Government bent over backwards to open the door for industrial-scale renewable energy developments in Scotland's 42 Wild Land Areas.

These were established by her predecessor, Alex Salmond, to protect Scotland's finest areas of unspoilt scenery from inappropriate wind farm development.

This initiative put Scotland at the forefront of efforts to protect some of Europe's most cherished wild places. Sturgeon squandered that legacy in favour of the corporate cowboys now exploiting the planning loophole she created.

The rest of Dave Morris's letter can be read at
<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-herald-1130/20261018/282248082537582>

The Scottish Government would not have been able to approve the Earba scheme if, as Dave Morris explained in the Sunday Herald two weeks ago (left), had Nicola Sturgeon not removed a major planning constraint on where they could be located, Wild Land Areas. While the way the Nicola Sturgeon manipulated planning policy was scandalous, the underlying issue is the absence of any national planning by the Scottish Government to determine where renewable energy developments would be best located. In the case of windfarms that might be out at sea and in the case of PSH in coires tucked away above large volumes of fresh water.

Instead, the Scottish Government has relied on the designation system as the main means of directing where renewable energy developments should be situated and then left it the market. Lobbied by that market Nicola Sturgeon scrapped one of the main constraints on that market, Wild Land Areas.

It just so happens that Coire Glas and several of the other PSH schemes above the Great Glen are not in areas nationally designated for their landscape or wildlife. That, however, doesn't seem to me to be the key point about Coire Glas. Its in a beautiful location and given a slightly different history might have been designated for its landscape or its wildlife. If it had been, it would still be a good location for a PSH, tucked out of view and with a large loch to act as a reservoir below, whereas Earba is not.

Our planning system has become encrusted with rules and regulations that both developers and government, at the local and national level, manipulate to serve their interests. What the Coire Glas and Earba PSH proposals show is we need to find a way to cut through all of that and get back to basics like, if we need PSH, where would they best be located?

Such decisions would be best taken by the public and elected representatives acting on the public's behalf, not unaccountable planners at the Energy Consents Unit. The job of the planners should then become to ensure developments agreed in principle by the public are developed with the least impact and to the highest possible standard.

Category

1. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. FLS
2. landscape
3. planning
4. renewables
5. Scottish Government
6. wild land

Date Created

October 31, 2026

Author

nickkempe

default watermark