

GLEN AFFRIC AND WIND FARM DEVELOPMENTS

Roger Crofts

The never-ending debate and conflict between protecting our priceless scenery and renewable energy projects continues. This time it is Glen Affric. So many others have preceded it and I am sure on the present basis many others will follow given the necessity of decarbonising our electricity generation in the face of rapid human induced climate change. But why do we never learn from past mistakes in making decisions? Why don't we have international recognition and verification to protect our finest landscapes? The answer is clear. We are unable as a society and government to set out strategic plans, rather preferring in the words of government 'to let market forces operate'. This has been the approach for over two decades now. Yes, there are indicative maps drawn up by local councils, such as Highland relevant to the Glen Affric case. Yes, there are safeguards for nature and wildland. But decisions are all stacked towards developers and landowners' preferences with local communities, as consultees, heard and then ignored. Scotland needs to do better...much better.

Some areas have been recognised for decades as being outstanding because of their natural beauty. Glen Affric is one of them in the eyes of landscape experts, visitor and local people. Glen Affric was identified by W. H. Murray in his classic *Highland Landscape* published by the National Trust for Scotland in 1962. Since then, its native pinewoods, lichens, birds and dragon flies have been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Area. And its natural and human qualities are recognised by its designation as a National Nature Reserve and a National Scenic Area. Murray said that despite forest operations and hydroelectric development Glen Affric is still one of the three of Scotland's most beautiful glens. Adam Watson described the area as 'a unique combination of mountains, lochs, rivers and ancient forest'. The Nature Scot description of the area using phrases such as 'a journey into the beautiful Loch Affric', 'wildness', 'venerable pine forest'.

It is now well known from many studies of high-quality landscapes and scenic areas that intrusive development over the boundary but visible from the area destroys the natural values and substantially lessens peoples experience and appreciation of the area that it provides to them aesthetically and emotionally. The wind farm development proposals mean that the landscape and scenic beauty of this outstanding area will be further reduced as there are apparently no safeguards in place to give the area the perpetual protection it deserves from this type of intrusive development.

It is hoped that government agencies will help to safeguard this area. Nature Scot, as the government's statutory adviser on landscape and scenery, as well as nature, and Forest and Land Scotland, as the owner and manager, will argue the case for the area to be safeguarded from further intrusive activity within its boundaries and beyond which will have a detrimental effect on the outstanding natural and cultural qualities of the Glen Affric.

There is also more that needs to be done to ensure that this is not a recurring problem in areas like this. The Regional Land Use Strategies, now supported by the Scottish Government, should form the basis of identifying areas of conflict and determine resolutions which will provide the basis for the future. To ensure this occurs much clearer guidance on priorities for safeguarding Scotland's finest landscapes and their scenic beauty is needed. Too often in recent years it seems that the Scottish Government has been reluctant to recognise these important attributes of Scotland loved by locals

and visitors alike. This will not be sufficient, however. Now is the time to move forward on an unambiguous government commitment to safeguarding our scenery and landscapes. The Scottish Landscape Alliance argued for this in its report *Landscape and Place for Success* published in autumn 2020. The critical point in this context was the recommendation to ‘develop and implement an internationally recognised national statute for landscape protection which safeguards the benefits offered by well-managed landscapes’.

This is much more fundamental and necessary step than the current pre-occupation with a third national park. Those involved in the latter seem not to understand that Scottish national parks are **not** primarily for rural economic development. Rather as the founding legislation states unambiguously where there is conflict between the park’s aims priority must be given to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

Neil Cresswell

“it is the lochs, tantalising pine-laden, fresh-water islands,
trees, rivers, hills, mountains, waterfalls,
tracks and abundance of superlative wildlife,
that makes this glen, irresistible.
A stunning, fabulous and quite unforgettable place.”