

SCOTTISH WILD LAND GROUP

CONVENOR'S REPORT 2018 – 2019

This year has passed all too quickly, and it is easy to reflect that we have achieved relatively little in our work on wild land, landscapes and the natural heritage, despite constant effort. The sheer number of development proposals that pose “threats” or at least have the potential to impact on our core interests is staggering. In addition, SWLG is run by a very small team of dedicated volunteers who, despite being generous with the time they devote to the organisation are only able to consider a small number of developments.

There has been a slight decrease in membership levels and it is very likely that failure to subscribe automatically on the part of many members may be contributing to this. Our Membership Secretary Grant Cornwallis, chases up lapsed members with some success. However, this is a frustrating process that causes the expenditure of time and resources.

Our funds are healthy, thanks to the careful vigilance of Tim Ambrose. We have reduced some costs over the last couple of years due to using an efficient and less costly printing service, but the cost of postage has escalated. Even A5 envelopes for posting out magazines have become more expensive!

Peter Willimott is working on the website and more frequent posts, links and changes have been made recently. I would urge members to use the website more frequently in order to access up to date information. This is particularly important as the magazine is produced insufficiently frequently to enable us to keep members involved with and promptly alerted to current events. Due to electronic communications, when a campaign is running, immediate input is required, including emailing MSPs, so the use of media is crucial for us to maintain our profile and have impact. One of our younger members offered to help with social media and to keep our Twitter account in particular, active on a very regular basis. To this end, he enthusiastically drew up a very professional media strategy and set to work. However, as is the way sometimes, he got a job down south, so we haven't made as much progress on this to date as we should have liked.

Apart from the website, our main mouthpiece is our magazine, Wild Land News. Since the last AGM our diligent editor, James Fenton, has produced 2 copies which have been well received by members and also distributed widely by Steering Group members, most especially Grant Cornwallis. James expends a huge amount of time in finding and encouraging contributors. A couple of articles have failed to materialise in time and he has stepped into the void and provided material himself. We continue to need good interesting landscape related photos for the magazine so if you can help in this way, please get in touch.

The Steering Group members mostly communicate via e-mail, as we are so scattered throughout Scotland, but we have tried to have face to face meetings more often this year. These are held in the Scottish Environment LINK offices in Perth. We had a meeting and site visit to Mar Lodge in August, as our annual Away Day. Local members were invited to join us – unfortunately none did but several sent us encouraging e-mail responses. Andrew Painting arranged the day for us, which coincided with ideal weather. We met at Mar Lodge and used their Stable block as a base, subsequently

visiting the Braemar Community hydro scheme when one of the Directors showed us the plant, which is reputed to be an example of a hydro scheme where there is minimal impact on the local environment. This did largely seem to be the case although one wonders whether such expenditure for such a small generation gain [although the community benefits financially and socially] is fully justified. After lunch, Andrew took us around part of the estate to see some of the environmental work that the NTS is doing as well as a look at one of the sites of the major floods and bridge damage that occurred a couple of years ago. A couple of the Steering Group took the opportunity to extend the weekend and camped and walked in the hills nearby.

This past year seems to have been the year for launches and conferences. The Scottish Landscape Alliance launched in April at Our Dynamic Earth and SWLG is an active participant in its work. A major re-wilding conference, Scotland the Big Picture, was held in September and Pete Ewing attended on our behalf. The Revive Coalition had a major launch in October 2018 with Chris Packham as the main speaker, and subsequently held a conference in Perth where Helen Todd of Ramblers Scotland and I gave a presentation on our work on hilltracks and then participated in a panel discussion and Q&A session. During the year, Planning Democracy, with whom we work on planning matters as part of the LINK network, have held three Saturday workshops and I have represented our interests at two of these. There is never a shortage of workshops and other events to attend where SWLG can participate and be represented.

We have continued to be very active, especially for such a small organisation, with LINK members, their working groups, meetings and events such as Congress and various parliamentary activities. This enables us to keep informed and contribute to current policy thinking and to engage with decision makers at a very small cost to ourselves, and to share resources.

As members will be aware, one major activity this past year was our engagement with the Planning Bill, particularly at Stages 2 and 3 in relation to our Hilltracks campaign. The LINK advocacy team gave us support throughout this process and we also fortunate to enlist engagement from Andy Wightman MSP. Despite Andy's very reasonable amendments, we were not successful in our aspirations to bring Hilltracks into the full planning system. However, we will engage with the anticipated review of permitted development which is scheduled for 2020. The Planning Minister gave assurances that this is where any changes to legislation on Hilltracks would be considered, so we are taking him at his word. Hence work on Hilltracks continues; and recently as a result of a proposal to Perth and Kinross to which SWLG were the only public commentators, the proposal went to appeal and the Reporter recommended against it. Such successes are very sweet indeed! Unfortunately, we were not successful in opposing the Glen Etive hydro schemes, and we and the many other objectors will need to be vigilant during the construction and operational phases. The Planning Bill will be followed by a new Act, a revised Scottish Planning Policy and a revised National Planning Framework [NPF4], all of which will require scrutiny and comment.

There has been a fair amount of discussion of land use and management strategy and practice in Scotland over the past year, including the development of a new Forestry Strategy, and over the use of such a large proportion of Scottish land for driven grouse shooting and its associated activities, and other hunting. At the time of writing, the Werritty Review into grouse and moorland management is due to be published, well behind schedule, and we also await the Deer review report. No doubt the consideration of both of these will engage us for some time.