

Scottish Wild Land Group
2024 Annual General Meeting
Saturday 2nd December 2:00pm
Session Room, Parish Hall, 12 Keir Street, Bridge of Allan

MINUTES

Present

Steering Group

Grant Cornwallis, David Roper, Tim Ambrose, Peter Ewing.

Members

Jean Shaw, Christopher Shaw, Doris Dietrich, Norman McNab, Nick Kempe, Louise Brimelow, James Fenton, Scott Peddie, Roderick Brodie

Proxies appointed:

Alistair Cant, Tony Camerford, Paul Ewen, Danny Rafferty, Maureen Sturrock

Welcome and Convenor's Remarks

The Convenor welcomed all those attending and noting that a quorum was present declared the meeting open.

Apologies

Beryl Leatherland, Bill Stephens, Kate Ashbrook, Sooz Glen, Liz Bibby, Nick Forwood

Minutes of AGM held 2nd December 2023

The minutes of previous AGM had been posted to the SWLG website along with the papers for the 2024 AGM and hard copies were available in the room. The minutes were adopted unopposed.

Convenor's Report

The Convenor gave his annual report, thanking the Steering Group for its efforts whilst he had been overseas. His report is attached.

He noted that the group had lodged numerous objects to mobile phone masts in wild land, the consensus being that the government's drive to achieve full areal coverage of the UK was not only misplaced – only inhabited straths and glens justified the cost – but destructive of wild land amenity.

The Convenor noted that through its connections with Scottish Environment LINK the SWLG can punch above its weight. Many thanks must be offered to Beryl Leatherland

for her continuing role as LINK representative and particularly her efforts in the mobile phone mast and hill tracks campaigns, but it would be useful to strengthen the ability of SWLG to influence LINK's representations and campaigns by appointing a further representative to support Beryl.

Major thanks should be offered to James Fenton, who is stepping down as a trustee and as editor of Wild Land News. Under his editorship the quality of the magazine has been outstanding. He remains willing to assist technically to ensure a smooth transfer of skills but is no longer able to commit the time needed to commission and edit articles. His extensive photo collection remains available to the SWLG.

James Fenton submitted an objection to the Loch na h-Earba pumped storage hydro scheme on behalf of the SWLG. The objection focused on the developer's assertion that the development would cause only "*localised changes to strength of wildness*" and that "*study area would still form a viable part of [Wild Land Area 14]*". Although not submitted in the name of the SWLG, two further objections to Loch na h-Earba were submitted by trustees. Bill Stephens indicated that without a more meaningful consideration of alternatives any grant of planning permission could be challenged in the courts. This was the subject of his article published in Wild Land News 104. David Roper directly attacked the economic viability of both the scheme, the financial and technical capability of the developer and the failure of the planning system to consider such matters.

Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer presented the annual accounts and report, which will be lodged with OSCR. The accounts had been posted to the SWLG website along with the papers for the 2024 AGM and hard copies were available in the room.

The principle "take away" is that the charity currently holds some £22,000 in funds which I can apply to campaigning in 2025.

Adoption of Trustees' Annual Report and Accounts

The Annual Report and Accounts were adopted unopposed.

A proposal by the Treasurer that the independent examiner be reappointed was adopted unopposed.

Membership Report

The membership secretary reported that membership remained stable at close to its average of 350. There were 344 members, with 25 new members joining to replace a near equivalent number who did not renew their membership. It remained a problem keeping the register of members current as some failed to notify the charity of changes of address.

It was commented that the strength of the SWLG lay in its independence; it is self-funded by its members and does not rely on external support. To that extent the larger its membership, the better and it was suggested that efforts be made to recruit from local environmental campaigns such as “Hands Off Our Hills” and “NaeFare” (Hill of Fare Windfarm Information Group). Although these groups tend to be focused on very specific areas or developments that are not necessarily within wild land areas, they have active memberships; the SWLG could potentially act as a focal point emphasising that, notwithstanding that planning is localised, national energy policy connects all the individual schemes.

Election of Trustees

Pursuant to Article 77 of the constitution, all trustees retire at the AGM but are deemed to be re-elected (Article 78) unless they choose not to be reappointed, or an election is held and they are not re-elected. James Fenton gave notice of his intention not to seek re-election and no other members stood for election. The remaining trustees (Grant Cornwallis, David Roper, Tim Ambrose, Peter Ewing and Bill Stephens) were thus re-elected.

Any Other Business

- (a) James Fenton suggested that the AGM should be held earlier in the year, not least because of the inclement weather which had prevented several members from attending. A suggestion of June or early July was accepted by the new Steering Group.
- (b) There remained unfinished business regarding applying the funds held by the SWLG to promote its development. A proposal had been submitted at a previous AGM to appoint a part-time development officer, however the trustees had not taken this forward.
- (c) John Muir Trust, of which many SWLG members are also members, seems rather to have lost its way, resulting in a complete renewal of its board of trustees at its last AGM. SWLG remains one of the few, independent organisations campaigning for wild land. Scotland’s wild lands are integral to its national identity and underpin much of its tourism industry. Might it be worth promoting membership internationally (possibly through tourism vectors)?
- (d) There was an extended discussion as to whether SWLG should become more directly critical of energy policy or focus on explaining the value of wild land with a view to engaging more people in its protection? Whilst energy policy is a significant factor in the destruction of wild land, it is not the only one. James Fenton noted several current band wagons that were promoting and funding what he viewed (speaking as a professional ecologist) as poor conservation ecology. Amongst these he noted the widespread planting of riparian woodland, peatland restoration,

the “biodiversity crisis” and upland overgrazing as being harmful to wild land. In addition, beyond direct energy infrastructure (wind farms, PSH, runoff-river hydro, export powerlines) there remains commercial forestry, forestry for carbon offsetting, phone masts and the perennial issue of access tracks.

Considering the options, focus on wider popular engagement with wild land as a good in and of itself provides a chance to engage with to all these threats.

Conversely, convincing a generally disinterested populace – the majority of whom are urban, central belt – to stand up for wild land in the face of concerted mis/disinformation campaigns from government and vested interests is a major challenge. Focusing on the interaction of energy policy, the planning system and how they promote unwarranted public detriment for private gain, including impact outside designated wild land areas, could engage a much broader audience.

- (e) Bill Stephens (via an email to the Convener on 6th December) reiterated a point made at the 2023 AGM that professionally produced visuals illustrating how our wildscapes will be transformed by the numerous wind farms, pumped storage schemes and grid connections deemed to be required should be commissioned by SWLG.
- (f) Norman McNab supported addressing energy. The Institution of Engineers in Scotland has long been concerned with the lack of a strategic plan that could substitute for the centralised planning of the CEGB that was removed when power generation was privatised. It was suggested that some of the funds held by the SWLG could be put to producing another special issue (the previous being Special Issue 83 – Windfarms Gone Wild Summer 2013) addressing the impact of energy policy on wild land. Included in this might be an analysis of the financial relationship between Forest and Land Scotland and the wind sector.

Close

There being no other business, the meeting closed at 15:30

LINK Representative Report for SWLG

LINK is an increasingly busy organisation. There are now over 40 member charities /NGOs. This gives SWLG via our membership to punch above our weight by association. An example of this is the ability to sign up to the various parliamentary and press briefings, reports, ministerial letters and so on that we can scrutinise and, if appropriate, support, often including display of our logo. This all helps to raise our profile, [both within Scotland and south of the border], which is admittedly low outside the LINK network.

Now that Tim Ambrose is no longer LINK Treasurer, and my several terms on the LINK Board have been served, it would be an idea to appoint an additional SWLG person to participate in at least one LINK Group. This would help inform our work and also increase our presence among the other eNGOs. If anyone feels they could contribute in this way, I would be pleased to discuss the possibilities with them.

LINK Hilltracks campaign: This year Helen Todd of Ramblers Scotland retired. You will recall that Helen and I co-chaired the campaign, and that arrangement had worked well for 13 years. I had always said that I would work on the campaign until Helen retired; however, there is still work to be done, so I will continue at least until the next Scottish parliamentary elections. The campaign has been continuing to monitor Hilltracks but at a lower level of activity, while we await Phase 3 of the GPD review to be consulted on. As with other Scottish Government initiatives, this seems to have slipped from their assurances [Helen and I met with the Chief Planner in 2022 and were assured that this would take place in 2023!] so I am arranging a meeting with Scottish Ramblers, the LINK Parliamentary Advocacy officer, and maybe others to make a further push on this and to possibly include Hilltracks legislation in the LINK Manifesto for the next parliamentary elections [must get ready well in advance!], as well as arranging a meeting with the Chief Planner again. Must keep the pressure on! The campaign has achieved a lot so far, but it would be good if we could drive a further change in the legislation.

Scottish Landscape Alliance [SLA]. I am struggling to have time to be an active participant in this worthy alliance, which works across a variety of relevant interests. If anyone feels that they could represent SWLG on this body, could they please contact me to discuss? The commitment is around 6 online meetings a year plus some input to support that, and maybe a face-to-face annual meeting /AGM. The NTS and LIS do most of the work, but they need input and affirmation from member organisations. Over the past year they have achieved interest and buy in from the Minister [in this case, Mairi Geougeon] in their aim to resurrect interest in and delivery of the expectations of the European Landscape Convention (ELC) and to update the Scottish Landscape Charter. In liaison with the minister, they commissioned a consultation in various communities across the Central Belt and redrafted the Scottish Landscape Charter which they are looking for support from the Minister for. The Scottish Government is a

signatory to the ELC – but like lots of other commitments, they do not respect their obligations. The ELC is a Council of Europe convention so despite Brexit, we should still be adhering to it.

Beryl Leatherland [December 2024]