








	CONSERVATION	1
	FARMING	2
	WOODLANDS	2
	FISHERIES & FISHFARMING	3
	MARINE	3
	POLITICS & PARLIAMENT	4
	GENERAL ENVIRONMENT	4
	ENERGY	6
	RECREATION & TOURISM	8
	NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS	8

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CONSERVATION

HEN HARRIERS & GROUSE

The BBC News website reported that research has been undertaken which suggests that hen harriers can co-exist with profitable grouse shooting.

Professor Steve Redpath of Aberdeen University led the team which developed a model showing the densities at which the birds can survive together. The study found that in areas where hen harriers breed at levels that have a significant economic impact on grouse shoots, some chicks could be removed. They would then be reared in captivity and released into the wild elsewhere. Similar schemes are used in continental Europe in regions where harriers breeding in crops are threatened by harvesting.

The research focused on grouse moors in England, where the hen harrier is said to be close to extinction as a breeding bird, but Professor Redpath believes that the findings are relevant to Scotland. He said: "Any decision about how to use this model depends as much on politics as on science. However, if both sides are interested in pursuing the idea, this model provides a framework for this dialogue to take place."

James Reynolds, of RSPB, said: "We look forward to reading this paper and it could play a major role in helping to resolve the hen harrier-grouse conflict. A brood management scheme may merit experimental investigation in the future, but only once hen harrier numbers have recovered to a pre-agreed level and less interventionist approaches, particularly diversionary feeding, have been widely attempted. The authors suggest that there is room on English grouse moors to support 70 pairs of hen harriers with only minimal costs to landowners. We want to work together with the shooting community to resolve the conflict by using tried-and-tested methods such as diversionary feeding, until the apparent impact of that then requires an alternative approach."

See: Elston D A, Spezia L, Baines D & Redpath S M 2014. Working with stakeholders to reduce conflict – modelling the impact of varying hen harrier *Circus cyaneus* densities on red grouse *Lagopus lagopus* populations. *Journal of Applied Ecology*.

ORKNEY FOSSILS

The BBC News website reported that fossil beds at Yesnaby in Orkney have been damaged, apparently by unscrupulous fossil hunters. The area is classified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is protected under the Nature Conservation Act of 2004.

Rocks containing Horse Tooth Stromatolite fossils were broken off and removed from the area; the police are investigating.

EAST COAST SEA EAGLES

A pair of white-tailed sea eagles have successfully raised a chick in Fife. Their first chick 'disappeared' last year in Strathdon, in the Cairngorms National Park [Apr 14].

Rhian Evans, of RSPB Scotland, said: "I hope this youngster makes it into the breeding population. It is always a concern given what happened to last year's youngster as this one may also come to grief. This second chick is really significant as it means the adults we introduced are

breeding on their own and starting to find their own feet, which is testament to the project."

NATTERJACK TOADS

The BBC News website reported that a photographic database of the endangered natterjack toad is being built up at the RSPB Mersehead nature reserve near Dalbeattie on the Solway Firth. Each toad has a unique pattern of warts which enables individual animals to be identified.

The data collected will then be used by researchers monitoring whether the population rises or falls in the coming years.

The toads face several threats, including habitat loss, climate change and a fungal infection first identified in 1999.

Pete Minting, of the Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust, said: "We have a tiny population of adults, only around 200, and they're really just clinging on here. There's not really enough being done to deal with the problems and the threats which they face in Scotland at the moment. They have declined a lot since the 1970s, and again since 2005 for reasons we don't really understand, so it's important to study them."

GROUSE

The BBC News website reported that a study by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has found that red grouse are laying their eggs half a day earlier every year. Hens have been radio-tagged since 1992 at hatching sites across Strathspey to measure laying dates.

Dr Kathy Fletcher, of GWCT, said that a gradual increase in spring temperatures, specifically in April, had caused the earlier laying. She said: "Although warmer springs provide more plant food for the hens to get into good condition for breeding, warming in May and August may be less good for important food sources for the chicks. Although grouse were the only species monitored in this particular study, the climatic effects will also be relevant to other bird species some of which are of conservation concern. So far grouse numbers have not been affected by the temperature range reported in this study but it is important that we continue this kind of research and also expand it to other parts of the birds' range."

The latest studies will be used to help develop management practices for upland gamekeepers, determining the dates and locations for work such as heather burning.

SEABIRD BREEDING

The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) recorded some species of seabirds as having their most successful breeding season for a decade.

There were 1,642 pairs of kittiwakes nesting on Mingulay, up 46% since last year. More importantly, their breeding success, at 88 chicks produced per 100 pairs, was much better than 2013. Other species, such as Razorbills, Common Guillemots and European Shags also recorded substantial improvements in both numbers and breeding success.

Studies carried out by the Highland Ringing Group on Canna suggested that kittiwakes were up 14% since last year and also had 'excellent breeding success.' Guillemots and razorbills also



FARMING

PACK REPORT

Brian Pack's final report, *Doing Better Initiative to Reduce Red Tape in Agriculture*, has been published [Dec 13]. The report contains 61 separate recommendations, the first of which is the establishment of an overarching advisory board to ensure that regulatory bodies in Scotland are strategically and operationally aligned. See: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/08/2494

RAT POISON

The Herald reported that studies have claimed that rat poison is toxic to non-target species that inadvertently ingest these chemicals when eating poisoned rodents. Such species include stoats, barn owls, red kites and kestrels. Rodenticides can currently be bought and used without any formal training. However, a change in regulations is now being considered as a result of reclassification of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs) by the European Union (EU). SGARs are so toxic they should not be used at all, but as rats have built up resistance to first-generation anticoagulants, the EU recognised that a scheme had to be put in place to allow their use.

A spokeswoman for the Health & Safety Executive said: "While the use of rodent poison is necessary in some circumstances, we are aware of concerns about the risk this can pose to wildlife and especially predatory birds. We have asked the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use to develop proposals for an industry-led stewardship regime to ensure these poisons are used responsibly."

Under the proposals, farmers will have to pass a basic training course to apply SGARs on farms. Only certified users will be allowed to buy larger packs for 'professional use against rats and mice.'

NEONICOTINOIDS

The *BBC News* website reported that Scottish ministers are facing renewed calls to ban certain pesticides.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) said that there had been a 60% decline in the number of bumblebees in the past 50 years, and believes that a group of pesticides known as neonicotinoids, as well as loss of habitat, are to blame [Apr 13]. SWT said a number of important pollinators including bumblebees, hoverflies and butterflies were under threat. Species such as the great yellow bumblebee have become rarer and confined to the north and west of Scotland while butterflies such as the marsh fritillary and the pearl bordered fritillary had also dwindled.

SWT has begun a number of initiatives including the creation of a 'nectar network' between Troon and Irvine in Ayrshire by planting wildflowers to connect habitats for wild pollinators.

Dr Maggie Keegan, of SWT, said: "The trust believes the decline in wild pollinators and honeybees may act like the 'canary in the mine' – indicating that Scotland's landscapes and ecosystems are not being managed sustainably. Everyone can do their bit to help these wonderful creatures recover by creating a window box and planting wildflowers in the garden, but it is vital we tackle this issue at the landscape-scale to create a 'nectar network' across Scotland. The trust hopes this debate converts words into action from the Scottish Government. At the very least, the trust would like to see the Scottish government commit to banning harmful pesticides such as neonicotinoids outright and supporting research into pollinators and low-pesticide farming systems."

experienced better breeding success and higher numbers than in recent years. Five occupied nest burrows of Manx shearwaters were found at three locations on Canna. Rats had wiped out shearwaters on the island, but a successful rat eradication project has allowed them to recolonise their former nest sites [Aug 06].

On St Kilda, the NTS said that annual monitoring suggested that puffins have had much greater breeding success than in recent years.

A programme to study the elusive and little known Leach's storm-petrel has been able to take detailed measurements of three chicks that have been reared in artificial nest burrows this year.

Bob Swann, of the Highland Ringing Group, said: "Although we are unlikely to see a return to the peak numbers of the 1980s and 1990s, I'm hopeful that the declines may have stopped and, for some species, even reversed."

St Abb's National Nature Reserve has seen good breeding success of black-legged kittiwakes and European shags, the latter producing 195 chicks per 100 pairs (the highest productivity on record and double that of 2013). This follows many years of declining numbers in this and other North Sea colonies.

RED SQUIRRELS

The *BBC News* website reported that six cases of a bacterium, similar to *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*, have been confirmed in red squirrels in Scotland since 2006. It is the first time that the disease, similar to leprosy, has been found in the species; little is known about the spread of the potentially fatal disease. Infected animals have been found from Dumfries & Galloway to the Moray Firth.

Symptoms include hair loss and severe swelling to the snout, eyelids, ears and feet.

Professor Anna Meredith, of the Royal Dick School of Veterinary Studies at Edinburgh University, is leading the research. She said: "We suspect this disease is more widespread than the six cases we have confirmed. Red squirrels are in decline. They are threatened by the grey squirrel and already face the major threat of the squirrelpox virus. This is the last thing that they need – another disease which could potentially threaten the population."

The Herald reported that Professor Meredith said: "We discovered this because of our general surveillance of squirrels in Scotland which involves dead squirrels being sent to us. It was part of our routine scanning for squirrel pox. We weren't going out looking for it, but we have managed to collate these six cases over the years."

"It is difficult to say how quickly they die from it, but generally this type of disease is very slow and chronic. We have had sightings and pictures sent in of squirrels feeding in people's gardens with very similar lesions. So it is very different from squirrel pox which is a rapid epidemic killing them quickly. But the six we have seen were all adults in very poor condition. So they do succumb."

The bacterium involved hasn't previously been reported in relation to leprosy in animals. Professor Meredith said that there was no pattern and their distribution suggested it wasn't a localised issue. "But leprosy is a difficult disease to catch. It is not highly infectious. So we need to find out where they are picking up the bacteria and what the risks are. It is potentially worrying."

Researchers are asking the public to inform them of any sightings of diseased squirrels, and to send dead squirrels, in the post, to Edinburgh.

See the *post-mortem* guidance note on: www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk/squirrel-facts/red-squirrel-threats

A Scottish Government spokesman said it was 'committed to taking a precautionary approach on the use of neonicotinoids.' He said: "It is essential, given concerns that have been expressed about the efficiency of previous [UK DEFRA] funded field trials, that we await further research that clearly and properly demonstrates the nature and extent of risk that neonicotinoids pose to bees, and other pollinators, when they are foraging."

CAP REFORM

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that the main elements of the replacement scheme for the Single Farm Payment were announced earlier this year [Jun 14]. A letter from Richard Lochhead, Scottish rural affairs minister, has now been sent to all crofters and farmers outlining some of the details.

Most of the 'disadvantaged' regions, which includes most of the Highlands and Islands, will have a headage payment of 100 € (£80) per gimmer – females of between one and two years of age. There will also be a higher payment for each beef calf born in the islands, although the rate is not yet known. In addition, there will be a payment of £8 per hectare for the most disadvantaged areas. There will be a higher payment, of £80 and £176 for arable, for those on better quality land who will not receive any headage support.

£14m has been set aside for crofting grants in 2015, but there is, at yet, no indication as to how the Crofting Counties Agricultural Support Scheme will be administered.

HARVEST

The Herald reported that this year's harvest is proving to be a 'mixed bag.' Farmers in the north of the country were hardest hit following the tail end of Hurricane Bertha, with ground conditions holding progress back and reports of combines getting stuck. Some of these areas received 220 ml of rain between January and July and then received more than 200 ml in the first few weeks of August. The amount of water in some fields is leading to worries about germination. In contrast, farmers in the Borders recorded their earliest ever harvest.



WOODLAND

GLEN FINGLAS

A herd of Luing cattle have been given access to a large area of newly established native woodland on the Woodland Trust's Glen Finglas Estate in the Trossachs, for the first time since it was planted fifteen years ago. The cattle cause minimal damage to the young trees and their hooves are perfect for breaking up ground, allowing seeds to take root. They also help maintain healthy ground flora by grazing on coarse grasses and trampling bracken to keep them in check. This process can help to reduce the risk of grass fires in dry years.

Phil Gordon, the estate manager at Glen Finglas Estate, said: "As long as a healthy balance is maintained, grazing and expanding native woodland can run hand-in-hand. Trees provide shelter and shade for the livestock, and cattle are naturally designed to keep other vegetation down and break up the ground. The ancient upland wood pasture at Glen Finglas is recognised as one of the best examples in the UK, and it has been here since the estate was a royal hunting forest. We're now working to create the wood pasture of the future, and allowing cattle in to graze the woodland is a key part of this process."

PRESSMENNAN WOOD

The comma butterfly and nuthatch have been recorded, for the first time, by the Woodland Trust Scotland at Pressmennan Wood near Stenton in

East Lothian. Both species are uncommon in Scotland and have in recent years been extending their breeding ranges in the south, with sporadic sightings further north.

Formerly an extensive oak wood, Pressmennan Wood was planted with conifers in the middle of the 20th century.



FISHPARTING & FISHERIES

SOUTH SKYE FISHFARM

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that Highland Council has refused planning permission for Hjaltland's Loch Slapin fishfarm, near Kilbride on the Elgol peninsula. The rejection notice quoted 'unacceptable impacts on individual and community residential amenity, habitats, species, marine systems, landscapes and scenery.' It said that the size and scale of the development 'would erode the tranquil nature of the landscape.' The report also cited potential impacts on the wild fish population.

The community council, John Muir Trust and local fishing representatives had opposed the submitted plans.

The planning refusal casts doubt on anticipated proposals for two further fishfarms at sites in nearby Loch Eishort. Hjaltland is investigating developing fishfarms in Uig Bay and Loch Snizort in the north of Skye.

WILD SALMON CATCH

The Salmon and Trout Association (Scotland) (S&TA) appealed to Scottish ministers to encourage maximum restraint in any exploitation of salmon in the next few months. The appeal is in response to this year's very poor runs of salmon, which so far in 2014 are believed by many to be the worst in living memory.

The evidence for this is from angling catches, in-river netting catches and fish counters across most of Scotland.

Hugh Campbell Adamson, of S&TA(S), said: "The very limited numbers of salmon returning to our shores reflect poor marine survival for the second year running. On many rivers, angling catches to date are no more than 50 % of what one would normally expect. In the circumstances it is vital that as many as possible of those salmon that have successfully returned from the ocean are able to spawn successfully, and so anglers have a responsibility to release as many as possible of the fish they catch. Given the gravity of the situation Scottish ministers need to intervene immediately to stop any further killing of salmon this season by the coastal nets.

"In recent weeks salmon returning to the coast after their marine migrations have, because of the low water levels in most rivers, been either reluctant to or unable to enter their rivers of origin. Due to these summer conditions depleted stocks have meandered up and down the coast where they have been highly vulnerable to the coastal nets. These nets have been able to kill an entirely disproportionate number. The government's support for the netting industry, and its failure to regulate or limit catches, is now coming home to roost. Ministers have a clear duty to step in to prevent any further indiscriminate killing of our depleted and fragile stocks".

Scottish Government figures show that the number of salmon killed in nets in 2013 was 50% higher than in 2012. There are no quotas set for wild salmon and consequently there is no mechanism to limit catches by netmen – whatever the strength or weakness of local populations.

The Scottish Government has announced that there will be a consultation on statutory conservation measures designed to take proactive action to protect the early-running spring salmon that are at particularly low levels across Scotland. The new measures will be effective for commencement in 2015, requiring mandatory catch and release until 1 April, together with a delay in the start of the net fishing season. The conservation measure would be for an initial five year period at which point it would be reviewed.

Paul Wheelhouse, the minister for the environment & climate change, said: "I am very conscious that the independent Review of Wild Fisheries will report in October 2014 [Feb 14]. And I will need time to consider the recommendations made, and to consult further on firm policy propositions in due course. However, I have taken the view that the protection of the spring stocks cannot wait for that work to be completed, and I want to make clear our future intentions as regards this specific issue of concern."

SOLWAY COCKLES

The *BBC News* website reported that the Solway Cackle Fishery Management Study, to test a new management approach and allow limited fishing in the Solway Firth, has been forced to finish ahead of schedule [Nov 13]. The contractor involved in the project, due to run until mid-September, withdrew due to 'difficult conditions and low prices in key markets.' The fishery will now remain closed until further notice.

Richard Lochhead, the Scottish fisheries secretary, said: "Marine Scotland has been working with the local community and agencies to achieve a sustainable long-term cockle fishery which delivers significant economic benefits to the wider local community. It is obviously disappointing the study has had to finish early but even this development is a learning point. Marine Scotland are content to accept the end of the contract as we feel nothing further can be learnt from the study given current market conditions."

He said that once the study had been 'fully considered' future management options for the fishery would be looked at. He said: "These options will be fully discussed and explored with the local community before any final decision is taken. Our overarching aim remains a fishery in the Solway that is safe, sustainable and offers local benefits for years to come."



MARINE

MPAs

The *Herald* reported that the residents of South Uist are concerned by the impact of a potential Marine Protection Area on opportunities for fishing, cockling, seaweed collection and offshore wind, wave and tidal energy projects [Jul 14].

The islanders claim that the imposition of a marine Special Protection Area (SPA) to the west of South Uist would add to the extensive range of designations and protections 'already covering every square inch of South Uist' and contribute to further depopulation.

Huw Francis, of community landlord Storas Uibhist, said: "The potential marine SPA follows close on the approval of the South Uist Wild Land Map, which despite strenuous local objections was even extended after the initial consultation to include an offshore island with a radio mast on it [Jul 14]. It is ironic that in the rush to protect wildlife and restrict the activities of local residents it seems to be forgotten that these ecologically important areas are in such pristine condition only as a result of the sustainable management practices of local fishermen and crofters."

A Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) spokesman said that a marine SPA might not preclude fishing. He said that ministers were considering 14 new SPAs for marine birds, and one of them lies on the west coast of the Outer Hebrides: "Given that these sites are already important and of sufficient quality to support the birds, it may be reasonable to assume that current fishing in many of these areas is largely compatible with the birds' interest.

"The aim is always to find ways to enable fishing whilst continuing to protect the birds. The same would apply to other forms of development and commercial activity in, or affecting, SPAs, including aquaculture and renewable energy development and shellfish harvesting ... Many of the features of these sites help to underpin the islands' tourism economy and some have proved useful in attracting external funding and jobs for environmental management projects."

HEBRIDES TERRACE SEAMOUNT

Heriot-Watt University has used a remotely operated submersible vehicle to explore the Hebrides Terrace Seamount. One of three seamounts in the UK's seas, its peak is 1,000 metres beneath the surface and 1,400 metres above the surrounding sea floor.

Professor Murray Roberts, who led the research, said: "In the Pacific there are many thousands of seamounts but off Scotland we have the only seamounts there are in the UK. Nobody had ever dived it or seen what was growing on the sides of this seamount. There were at least 109 different *taxa* down there, all the way from really strange single-celled organisms to clusters of deep sea corals. I was surprised to see the diversity that we saw."

SCOTTISH SHINGLE

A report, *SNH Commissioned Report 739: Inventory of coastal vegetated shingle in Scotland – field validation*, has been published by Scottish Natural Heritage which builds on the findings of a 2011 report.

The new report finds that there are more vegetated shingle beaches in Scotland than previously thought, and most of them are in good condition. There are about 1,120 hectares of shingle beaches with vegetation in Scotland.

Shingle coastlines are a distinctive feature of the Solway and Moray Firths and the Isle of Arran, as well as on scattered sites around the coast of Scotland. Coastal shingle is internationally rare. Vegetated shingle supports a variety of plants and animals, with some highly specialised species adapted to tolerate harsh coastal conditions.

Vegetated shingle is protected under the EU Habitats Directive and about 20 shingle sites in Scotland are protected under national legislation.

See: bit.ly/VmzEdf

MARINE LITTER STRATEGY

A Marine Litter Strategy for Scotland has been published by the Scottish Government, and complements the national litter strategy [Jun 14]. It details the scale of the problem and 40 new actions to minimise coastal and marine litter. Marine litter impacts on the environment, wildlife, industry and tourism and is estimated to cost Scotland £16.8m every year.

The strategy states that the majority of litter found on Scotland's beaches and seas is made up of plastics, which present a significant risk for marine wildlife. Marine litter is a significant issue for the fishing industry – vessels participating in the Fishing for Litter initiative landed over 374 tonnes of litter between 2011-14 and it is estimated that the problem costs every vessel in the Scottish fleet as much as £17,000 annually. Efforts will be focused not only on clearing up litter that has already entered the marine environment but also

on preventing it from ending up there in the first place – 80% of marine litter is thought to have been dropped on land originally.

The strategy extends Port Waste Reception Facilities to include fishing vessels, expands the KIMO Fishing for Litter initiative, encourages alternatives to plastic micro beads in personal care products and highlights the need to tackle sources of sewage related debris. See: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/09/4891

COMMON SEALS

The *BBC News* website reported that the numbers of common (harbour) seals in Scotland have continued to fall. The Sea Mammal Research Unit at St Andrews University, commissioned by SNH, counted fewer animals on Scotland's east coast and in Orkney.

1,095 animals were recorded between Cape Wrath and Ullapool. In 2008, a survey counted 2,687. At Aberlady Bay in East Lothian, 213 were spotted compared with 459 seven years ago. In Orkney, the survey recorded 1,865 compared with 2,687 in 2010.

At the Firth of Tay & Eden Estuary Special Area of Conservation, 50 seals were counted, the lowest figure so far recorded in that area. Previously, 78 were seen.

However, an increase in numbers of common seals was found on the west coast.

BLUE CARBON

SNH has published a report, *Commissioned Report 761: Assessment Of Carbon Budgets and Potential Blue Carbon Stores in Scotland's Coastal and Marine Environment*.

This report provides the first comprehensive assessment of the carbon budgets and potential blue carbon stores in Scotland's coastal and marine environment. So-called 'blue carbon' is captured and stored by a wide range of species of animals and plants from the microscopic plants found in the surface waters of seas (phytoplankton) and the extensive kelp beds off the west coast to the mussel beds and cold water coral reefs. The report estimates that around 18 million tonnes of organic carbon in plant and animal materials are stored in the top ten centimetres of sediment in Scotland's 470,000 square kilometres of sea.

The global ocean plays a vital role in trapping and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide that would otherwise remain in the atmosphere and contribute to the ongoing process of global warming; a service that until recently has been largely overlooked.

Ocean acidification could affect animals with hard shells, and may also cause erosion of dead calcareous material – thus releasing carbon back into the environment.

The report highlights the extent of the different habitats around Scotland and their capacity to trap and store carbon in the short, medium and long term and the need to ensure the continuing good stewardship of our marine environment to combat climate change.

Mike Burrows, from the Scottish Association for Marine Science, the principal author of the report, said: "By combining information on growth and other processes with the extent of different parts of the ecosystem, we were able to show that most of the carbon captured in Scottish seas is by microscopic plants in surface waters. The biggest stores of carbon are where these plants become buried in soft sediments after sinking into deep water. Coastal plants, like kelp and seagrasses, capture a large amount of carbon, less than the plankton, but no less important.

"Those many animals that build shells, like corals, clams and mussels, capture less carbon

but that shell material locks carbon away immediately for a very long time. All the coastal plants and animals are potentially vulnerable to local impacts, but the effect of climate change is probably the biggest and least understood effect on the rate of capture and storage of carbon in Scottish seas."

See: bit.ly/1AAzi6n



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

INDEPENDENCE & THE ENVIRONMENT

The Scottish Government has published a report which, it said, highlights the environmental benefits of independence. The paper stresses that the Scottish National Party's commitment to ensure environmental protection is at the heart of a written constitution.

The report highlights what the Scottish Government calls the 'five green gains of independence' which were outlined in the white paper on independence [Nov 13].

- Enshrining environmental protection in a written constitution
- Creating a nuclear-free nation
- A fairer share of EU funding to target at environmental schemes
- Using improved representation in Europe to drive the green agenda
- Championing action on climate change at the 'international top table'

Dr Richard Dixon, of Friends of the Earth Scotland, said: "This paper makes a number of welcome promises on how the environment would be protected in an independent Scotland. A written constitution enshrining the importance of the environment is probably the single most powerful environmental argument in favour of a 'yes' vote. Those who wish to stay as part of the UK need to show us how they would deliver something as powerful."

Claire Baker MSP said: "If we are to be honest in Scotland in how we tackle our environmental targets this is about political will and not constitutional change. Meeting our environmental challenges in the modern world needs co-operation and partnership working within the UK, across Europe and internationally. Putting a border between Scotland and England is not going to help that."

BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Report to Parliament 2011 – 2013 has been published. It contains details of the progress made in taking forward the strategy from 2011 to 2013 and information on the trends demonstrated by a series of biodiversity state and people engagement indicators. This is the third report on progress on the strategy. See: www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0045/00456952.pdf

ISLAND PLAN

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that the UK government has produced a ten point action plan in response to the Our Islands, Our Future campaign, established by a triple alliance of the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland councils. These collectively command 1% of the Scottish vote. The commitments include 'island-proofing' legislation, the setting up of an economic working group and fast-tracking renewable energy transmission links. However, the government did not promise to overhaul the Crown Estate and pass its responsibilities to local communities, simply pledging 'greater accountability and transparency' for the organisation [May 14].



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

BEN NEVIS SURVEY

The Herald reported that a three-year initiative is being undertaken by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to conduct an intensive study of the rocks and plants on the northern face of Ben Nevis.

The project will involve ten experienced climbers and two climbing botanists. They will conduct a roped-access botanical survey of the 300 acres that make up the steep north face of the Ben.

Midland Valley Exploration is providing a geological survey to help investigate the influence geology has on the distribution of the plants.

This will also raise awareness in the climbing community of the vulnerability of rare plants on the face.

The mountain and some of its satellite hills provide exceptional habitats for rare arctic-alpine flora. Their importance is reflected in the designations of the Ben Nevis Special Area of Conservation and Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The *BBC News* website reported that new populations of Highland saxifrage, tufted saxifrage and wavy meadow grass have been recorded. Alpine saxifrage, which has never been found on the mountain before, has been recorded.

Ian Strachan of SNH said: "Many of the rare arctic-alpine species we are searching for are relics from soon after the last ice age. Ben Nevis and a few other peaks in the Scottish Highlands provide the most southerly refuge for some of these species which can only survive due to the altitude and presence of semi-permanent snowfields."

The *Grough* website reported that the rocks that form the steep cliffs of the north face were formed during explosive volcanic activity around 420 million years ago, during the Devonian period. Roddy Muir of Midland Valley Exploration said: "The team of professional mountaineers has been gathering new data with our recently developed FieldMove Clino app, as well as getting us onto the previously unrecorded cliff faces. The emerging data will be used in structural modelling software and will bring greater understanding of the processes which formed and changed the mountain. It is likely that we may have to revise the traditional model of a classic caldera collapse."

Breccia rocks, formed by explosive eruptions, have been located at significantly higher altitudes than existing geological maps show. The team has also been able to measure the original orientation of the ancient lavas where these rocks flowed out of the volcanic fissure.

The project, which is led by the Nevis Landscape Partnership working in collaboration with Midland Valley Exploration, is funded by SNH, Heritage Lottery Fund, and Highland Council and is sponsored by equipment manufacturer Mammut.

FLOODING

Heavy and persistent rainfall near the start of the month, the remnants of Hurricane Bertha, resulted in a number of surface water flood problems across the north of Scotland. Huntly, Elgin and communities along the River Spey, the Dee, Don and Findhorn were affected.

Serious flooding caused damage on an unprecedented scale to areas around Aberdeenshire & Royal Deeside in a '1 in 200 year event.' The National Trust for Scotland's Mar Lodge Estate in Aberdeenshire was badly affected. The River Dee and all its tributaries burst their banks leading to flooding which has destroyed at least two foot bridges, and rendered some paths and tracks impassable. The footbridge at Derry Lodge has been

lost, which is on a major walking route leading to the Lairig Ghru, together with the upper footbridge in Glen Quoich.

The floods have also badly damaged a number of footpaths, fencing, vehicle tracks and bridges, also the flood defences for Mar Lodge itself.

- A national resilience centre, to deal with issues such as severe weather and flooding, is to be set up in Dumfries. The Crichton Campus will act as a national hub, coordinating work to understand how best communities and local emergency responders can prepare for an anticipated increase in natural hazard events as a result of climate change. Partners in this wide-ranging project include Dumfries & Galloway Council, Met Office, Scottish Environment Protection Agency and emergency response organisations such as Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service as well as the Scottish Funding Council and the Crichton Trust.

MIDGE NUMBERS

The Scottish Midge Forecast, run by APS Biocontrol Ltd, reported that three main midge-counting traps (in Wester Ross, Argyll and Galloway) recorded more than 800,000 midges between them in May. In the same month last year, only a couple of hundred were caught. By the second week of June, the Wester Ross trap alone caught 915,000 in seven days. In the first two weeks of August, numbers have been more than 12 times those recorded in 2013.

The mild winter meant more of the larvae survived, followed by above-average temperatures and rainfall exactly when the first hatch of the insects emerged [Mar 14].

SSPCA POWERS

The Scottish Government launched a public consultation on the possibility of giving the Scottish SPCA increased powers to investigate more types of wildlife crime [Mar 14]. The consultation concludes on 1 September. The SSPCA already has statutory powers to investigate some wildlife crimes, but not all. Currently, they are restricted to investigating wildlife crime offences that involve an animal in distress. They have legal powers under the Animal Health & Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 to gather evidence and report their findings directly to the Crown Office without needing to involve the police. If the additional legal powers are implemented, it would mean that the SSPCA could also investigate wildlife crimes where an animal has already been illegally killed, or instances where an animal has not yet been illegally killed but is likely to be. Improved wildlife crime enforcement would result from the addition of 63 fully-trained SSPCA inspectors (funded by SSPCA members with no government funding for its work).

The *Raptor Persecution Scotland* blog reported that the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) sent an email message to members. It read: "In March, Scottish Government issued a consultation on whether more investigative powers should be handed to SSPCA inspectors in suspected wildlife crime incidents. The SGA believes the granting of more powers to SSPCA would be disastrous and flies in the face of what would be deemed fair and just. Unlike Police, SSPCA are not publicly accountable, have previously sought convictions of gamekeepers with insufficient evidence and campaign to ban snares. They are also critical of rearing game birds for shooting and carry agendas regarding species protection. Help us to tell Scottish Government loudly and clearly that this move is WRONG."

The SGA also asked how could a charity with a campaigning role against the use of snares be

charged with impartially investigating cases involving snares?

Ian Thomson, RSPB Scotland's head of investigations, said: "While we welcome the Scottish Government's ongoing examination of the sentences given to convicted wildlife criminals, RSPB Scotland also strongly supports an extension to the powers of Scottish SPCA inspectors that would add capacity to the following-up of reports of illegal traps or dead birds and animals, and not just those actually reported as 'suffering.' This role is currently only undertaken by the police whose resources are over-stretched.

"We are sure that all those who wish to see an increase in the detection and conviction rate for those involved in crimes such as raptor persecution will welcome the chance to see the free, experienced and well-equipped resource offered by 60 (*sic*) Scottish SPCA inspectors added to the ongoing fight against the systematic killing of some of our rarest species.

- *The Press & Journal* reported that Andrea Goddard, a volunteer at the Tollie red kites centre in Easter Ross, delivered a petition calling for greater powers for Scottish SPCA investigators to environment minister Paul Wheelhouse. She gathered more than 6,900 signatures after the deaths of 16 red kites and six buzzards near Conon Bridge [Mar 14].

Ms Goddard said: "I would like to think that the terrible deaths weren't totally in vain and that if we can effect real and lasting changes on the back of this awful incident then their Highland cousins can be better protected for future generations to enjoy. The Black Isle poisoning incident is an example of how ineffective and inadequate the current system of wildlife crime investigation is, and that changes in the law are needed to ensure these types of criminals are brought to justice in future."

The petition will be considered as part of a Scottish Government consultation into wildlife crime investigations [see above].

- The Law Society of Scotland said, in its response to the consultation, that recent cases involving the poisoning of birds of prey highlighted a need for an increased police presence in some areas, which would act as a deterrent to wildlife crime. In the absence of police patrols, the society supported the proposal to give SSPCA staff greater powers, which include the ability to search vehicles suspected of carrying illegal carcasses, protected live animals and birds, and illegal traps or poisons.

The SSPCA officers would require specialist training and should be accompanied by a witness when exercising their new powers. There should be a review in two to five years to ensure that powers are being appropriately enforced.

The Herald reported that, in its formal submission to the consultation, the society said: "Police Scotland currently lacks the resources and personnel to adequately investigate wildlife crime. The consultation states that where incidents are discovered 'it is often impossible for police officers to attend the scene quickly.' This inability to quickly assemble in remote countryside locations, with the appropriate vehicles and equipment, often results in perpetrators having long removed traps and poisons from the crime scene by the time the police arrive."

The SSPCA is funded by charitable donations so proposals for new powers would help the police without hurting its bottom line. The charity's inspectors already takes part in wildlife investigations. They were involved in 37 that ended in convictions over the last five years, 23 using their evidence alone.

Some gamekeepers oppose SSPCA inspectors getting extra powers. One, Mike Reddington, claimed that his life was ruined by an 18 month criminal investigation, eventually dropped, into allegations he used an illegal crow trap.

He said: "It's frightening what the SSPCA were able to do to me and my family. They wanted to pursue this prosecution because, as an organisation, they are generally against the use of snares and these types of traps. I respect their right to have a view on traps, but if they are a lobbying body, they should not, in my view, be given powers similar to police. It would not happen in any other walk of life."

See: bit.ly/1wMkaQX

- The Onekind charity has also published its formal response to the consultation, in full support of the proposed changes. Data is provided, (sourced from the Crown Office), which shows a startling comparison of successful prosecutions and convictions in animal welfare cases investigated by the police and those investigated by the SSPCA; the SSPCA's performance is significantly stronger than that of the police. It also acknowledges the SSPCA's long-term experience in investigating crimes against animals (since at least 1912) and a strong rebuttal against the accusation that the SSPCA is 'unaccountable.' See: bit.ly/1ggSX41

- Scottish Land & Estates (SLE) has published its concerns about the proposals online. SLE want to stress that they strongly support the work of SSPCA but are concerned that there are too many serious questions for additional powers to be granted without extensive new safeguards. The debate is about the principle of a charitable body being responsible for policing. SLE is concerned whether there is a 'need' for increased powers because 'wildlife crime incident [*sic*] are now lower than when the idea was first put forward.'

SLE questioned the legal powers for SSPCA, whether the public would support a changed role and whether the SSPCA would be accountable in the same way as the police. SLE brought up the question of the training and competence of SSPCA inspectors and whether the charity would have access to police resources. SLE asked whether the SSPCA would be compromised by its campaigning objectives, particularly in relation to snaring. It questioned whether the long term funding for the SSPCA was secure and wondered if it would continue if the inspectors role was changed.

See: bit.ly/1u3axbZ

HILLTRACKS

The Scottish Government has announced new planning controls for hilltracks [Feb 14]. Through the introduction of a prior notification and approval process, planning authorities will be able to consider how proposed tracks will impact on the environment and intervene to ensure that design, siting and appearance are acceptable. Hilltracks, for any other purpose than agriculture and forestry, will continue to require full planning consent.

The requirements will be introduced 'later in the year' and will be an extension of existing prior notifications under Class 18 agriculture and Class 22 forestry which currently apply to tracks in natural scenic areas. Historically, agricultural and forestry tracks could be constructed and upgraded under permitted development rights, meaning that provided they met certain criteria a planning application was not required.

Tracks for any other purpose (leisure, sport shooting, etc) do not benefit from the permitted development rights; they require, and always have required, a planning application to be made and permission granted.

The proposals will mean that planning authorities are notified of plans for new tracks

and then will have 28 days to consider whether a planning application is required. Even without a planning application, authorities can decide that further information is needed before they grant prior approval even when the development falls under permitted development rights, or they may decide the landowner can just go ahead and build the track according to the details submitted, and with the option to enforce any changes from the proposals which they were notified about.

The *BBC News* website reported that the Mountaineering Council of Scotland said that it 'broadly welcomed' the announcement, but added that it was disappointed there was not an immediate ban on bulldozing tracks without permission.

Umbrella group Scottish Environment LINK said that it would continue to campaign for tracks to be brought fully into the planning system. The *Herald* reported that Helen Todd, of LINK's hill tracks campaign group, said: "We fail to see why landowners should be able to carry on constructing major tracks without the need for any public consultation. The new prior notification process will do little to address this fundamental inequity, which leaves communities, organisations and individuals with little opportunity to comment on new tracks."

Last year there were nearly 70 reports of such new tracks, some of which were used only for shooting parties.

Anne Gray, of SLE, said: "The minister has recognised that hill tracks are an important aspect of rural development and landowners – many of whom are committed conservationists – understand that a balance has to be struck to help meet the needs of rural businesses while protecting the environment and natural heritage. We acknowledge there have been concerns about the impact of some tracks and, while we understand the minister's reasons for seeking to introduce a system of prior notification for private roads and ways across Scotland, we feel the Scottish Government has been too quick to revisit this issue."

Ramblers Scotland said that it is concerned that, unless a full planning application is requested, there is no process of public consultation on these tracks. Local communities, individual hill walkers and organisations will not be aware of these new tracks or able to make any comment. Considering that householders have to submit a planning application for a new garage, Ramblers Scotland is mystified as to why these tracks, many of which are significant developments, do not also need to go through the planning system.

In addition, if the planning authority is too busy to respond within 28 days, the landowner can simply go ahead and build the tracks with no further oversight required. There is also an issue regarding enforcement, but the minister is proposing further powers relating to prior notification and prior approval.

The government has committed to monitoring the new situation and guidance will be issued to planning authorities.

AIR QUALITY

The *BBC News* website reported monitoring in Inverness city centre has suggested that there was a risk that annual mean levels of nitrogen dioxide could be exceeded around Queensgate and Academy Street. Highland Council is to designate parts of the city centre as an Air Quality Management Area. Council officers said that levels were not being exceeded at the moment but an action plan should be produced to tackle the potential risk. The local authority said that air quality in the region was generally good.

ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

Scotland's chief statistician has published *Key Scottish Environment Statistics 2014*.

This publication provides key datasets on the state of the environment in Scotland, with an emphasis on trends over time. It contains charts on public attitudes to the environment, global atmosphere, air quality, water, marine, radioactivity, waste, land, conservation and biodiversity which are supplemented by text providing brief background information on environmental impacts and relevant legislation. The full datasets are included. See: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/08/8973

PORTMOAK MOSS

A purpose-built mulcher unit has cleared and levelled a twelve hectare core area of Portmoak Moss, one of the few surviving raised peat bogs in central Scotland. The moss has suffered from decades of draining, and is being re-wetted. Native woodland is being encouraged to develop over the rest of the site. Ridges left from afforestation ploughing in the 1960s have been levelled, tree stumps left over as a result of commercial conifer planting reduced, and invasive scrub removed.

Portmoak Moss is a remnant of a complex of bogs and wetlands that developed around Loch Leven after the last ice age. The raised bog is an internationally rare habitat that is home to a number of rare species of moss and wildlife including dragonflies and damselflies.

The site was acquired by the Woodland Trust Scotland in 1996. The trust, with help from a local community group, trees have been cleared, seedlings controlled and dam drains made on the bog surface to help restore parts of the bog and increase water levels.

Recent work to restore the raised bog has been supported by SNH through the Green Stimulus Peatland Restoration Project.

GLASGOW BEES

The *BBC News* website reported that 120,000 bees have been installed in two hives on the roof of Glasgow City Council headquarters. The initiative is part of Sustainable Glasgow, a wider council scheme to use spare space around the city for sustainable development.

Plan Bee Ltd were contracted to provide the bees and hives as well as training council staff to look after the insects. Any wax produced in the hives will be used as a sustainable source of polish for furniture in the council's Satinwood Suite.

Warren Bader, of Plan Bee Ltd, said: "Glasgow is a fantastic garden city with a lot of green spaces including Glasgow Green, Kelvingrove Park and the riverside. There is a lot of buddleia which bees love and they can actually be safer in a city than in the countryside where a lot of farmers use pesticides and can plant monocultures (just one type of crop) which isn't healthy for pollen production. The bees will go out foraging across Glasgow and in a good summer could produce plenty of honey."

- Glasgow plans to stage Green Year 2015, 12 months of activities celebrating the city's green credentials and also encouraging others to 'do their bit' for the environment.

SHETLAND CAVE

The *BBC News* website reported that Jonathan Swale, a geologist, used a laser range-finder at the Calders Geo sea cave at Esha Ness in Shetland. He established that it is 60 feet high and spans a floor area of 5,600 square metres. This is one-and-a-half times as large as the Cheddar cave in Somerset, allowing it to claim to be the largest cave in Britain.

KINGUSSIE HOUSES

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that three additional homes have been approved by Cairngorms National Park planning committee, near St Vincent Hospital in Kingussie [Oct 09]. The first house was consented in 2012. Dr Gus Jones, of the Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group, said that the group had consistently opposed development at this site, call in for 'buffer areas' to safeguard native woodland and wildlife. He said: "Located hard up against the edge of woodland on the ancient woodland inventory, it is a particularly inappropriate development for a National Park with wildlife-rich native woodland."

LAND SALES

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that estate agents, Knight Frank, said that Scottish rural land sales were high, and that it was expected that demand would outstrip supply with average prices rising by 5% over a year. Recent sporting estate sales had shown the value of potential for producing income from renewable energy, or via a commercial agribusiness.

Knight Frank's Property Sporting Index tracked the average value of assets and had increased by 32% over the past ten years, with grouse moors showing the greatest rise at 49%. The cost of catching a single salmon had increased from £8,000 to £10,000 per fish over the period, and shooting a stag from £30,000 to £45,000.



ENERGY

WINDFARMS & HEALTH

Winds for Justice, an action group, has been set up to back legal actions against windfarms, including those in the planning stages, which are thought to pose a negative threat to public health.

Dozens of schemes are thought to have been approved in breach of the Aarhus Convention, a European law which stipulates that the public has a right to live in a healthy environment. Some studies have suggested that low-level noise, infrasound, emitted by turbines can deprive people living nearby of sleep.

However, a Scottish Government spokesman said that a review of international research had found no clear evidence of a causal link between the operation of wind turbines and adverse health effects.

WINDFARM UPDATES

Caithness: A public local inquiry was held into Infinergy's plans for a 24 turbine Limekiln scheme, near Reay [Jul 14]. The John Muir Trust (JMT) objected on the grounds that it is adjacent to the East Halladale Flows Wild Land Area, and would visually affect 15% of it.

Highland Council also gave evidence, describing the application as 'visually shocking.'

Helen McDade, of the JMT, said: "If the application were to succeed, it would undermine the integrity of the Wild Land Areas map, and encourage a flood of speculative applications by developers in and around the other 41 Wild Land Areas."

Because of the adoption of the Wild Land Areas map by the Scottish Government in June, the inquiry held a specific session on Wild Land.

Fife: Five potential sites have been identified for the council's wind power project. The sites were chosen after detailed studies of 25 areas of land which have a council building next to them. It is hoped that the turbines will generate up to £11.75m. Planning applications will be lodged in September.

Inverness-shire: Coriolis Energy wants to build 14 turbines on the Dell Estate, near Whitebridge on the eastern side of Loch Ness. Approval has

been given to construct the adjacent 67 turbine Stronelaig windfarm [Jun 14]. The company originally planned to erect 22 turbines, but, following concerns about visual impact, it reduced the plan to 16 and has now removed a further two turbines from the plans.

- JMT has challenged the Scottish Government's decision to give planning consent to SSE Renewables' 67 turbine Stronelaig windfarm, south east of Fort Augustus [Jun 14]. The JMT has lodged a petition to the Court of Session asking for a judicial review of the decision, saying that the development would 'destroy the character' of an area of wild land in the Monadhliaths. In the absence of 'proper democratic scrutiny' the JMT 'had to act.'

John Hutchison, of JMT, said: "Over the past year, the Scottish Government has made ground-breaking progress by adopting the new wild land areas map of Scotland, and, for the first time, recognising wild land as an important national asset. However, we believe the decision by the energy minister to give the go-ahead to Stronelaig without a public local inquiry is not consistent with Scottish Government measures to protect the best areas of wild land from industrialisation ... [the windfarm] was opposed by both the government's own advisory body on nature and landscape, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), and by the Cairngorms National Park Authority."

An SSE spokeswoman said: "This petition for judicial review is particularly disappointing given the extent of the local support for the project and its location around existing [Glendoe] hydroelectric infrastructure."

- Highland councillors refused planning permission for RWE Innogy UK's 20 turbine Glen Kyllachy windfarm near Tomatin, south of Inverness. Planning officials had recommended approval. Members of the committee said that the development would have 'a significant detrimental visual impact' and were concerned about the cumulative noise. The site was deemed too close to the established 40 turbine Farr windfarm; predictions were that noise levels would be close to the limits set within national noise guidance and standards. Councillor Margaret Davidson, said: "Many people think Farr windfarm looks nice on the landscape, but putting more turbines next to an acceptable windfarm does not necessarily make for a bigger acceptable windfarm."

Perthshire: Murdo Fraser MSP has secured a members' debate in the Scottish Parliament concerning the planned Talladh-a-Bheithe windfarm which would impact on wild land in the Rannoch area. 24 turbines are planned for two kilometres north of the Loch Rannoch & Glen Lyon National Scenic Area.

David Gibson, of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, said: "Hundreds of residents, businesses, mountaineers and others have written to object to this scheme which would have a massive visual impact across Rannoch Moor. Because of the open vista of the moor, this single development would significantly reduce Scotland's remaining wild land. Development here would destroy something precious.

"This is a chance for the Scottish Parliament to show that it is listening to the people and declare that it is unacceptable to industrialise our most beautiful landscapes. It is essential for our parliament to ensure that ministers keep their word on the protection of wild land and do not hand over our natural heritage so developers can make huge profits."

The windfarm will be the first major test of the Scottish Government's new planning guidance on windfarms.

Scottish Borders: Fred Olsen Renewables has submitted plans to the Scottish Government for a 26 turbine extension to the Crystal Rig windfarm in the Lammermuir Hills near Duns [Jan 10]. The windfarm is one of the largest in the UK and straddles the Scottish Borders and East Lothian. The windfarm already has 85 operating turbines.

- A public inquiry is to be held into proposals for the 18 turbine Cloich windfarm near Eddleston in Peebleshire. The local authority opposed plans for the windfarm, claiming that it would cause unacceptable harm to the landscape [Jun 14].

Sutherland: The *BBC News* website reported that the proposed 34 turbine Glenmorrie windfarm, near Bonar Bridge, has been refused planning permission by the Scottish Government [Oct 13]. A public inquiry reporter considered that the scheme would cause 'unacceptable landscape and visual impacts' and Highland Council had objected to the application, with concerns about the project's impact on the landscape, including wild land.

ABERDEEN OFFSHORE

The European Offshore Wind Deployment Centre (EOWDC), which will have 11 turbines, has been granted its marine licence by the Scottish Government [Jul 14].

The development is still involved in court battles with Trump International, which objects to the project. An investor is also still required to finance the £203m development, and a scheme must be found to mitigate radar interference. The project has been delayed by two years and Vattenfall has announced it is selling its 75% stake. The EOWDC is now expected to connect to the National Grid in 2017.

PRESTONPANS SUBSTATION

The Herald reported that East Lothian Council planners have recommended granting permission for an electricity substation at the site of the Battle of Prestonpans. The substation would take power from a proposed offshore windfarm of the Angus coast to the National Grid. The majority of the site is within the boundary of the battle. The Battle of Prestonpans 1745 Heritage Trust are opposed to the plans and are 'incredulous' that Historic Scotland believes that the development does not raise issues of national significance.

MARINE RENEWABLES

SNH has published two reports relating to marine renewable energy developments and their potential impact on the environment. These reports offer a risk assessment of the interaction between marine renewable devices and the diving birds and megafauna in the area.

Commissioned Report No. 773. A Diving Bird Collision Risk Assessment Framework for Tidal Turbines was funded by Marine Scotland and is available through Marine Scotland and SNH.

Commissioned Report No. 791. Understanding the Potential for Marine Megafauna Entanglement Risk from Marine Renewable Energy Developments is available through SNH.

PENTLAND FIRTH

The Herald reported that construction is to begin on the MeyGen tidal stream array in the Pentland Firth. Following the six turbine demonstrator project, the next phase of the project includes 61 turbines with the first electricity being delivered to the grid by 2016. The project was made possible by the Scottish Government's Renewable Energy Investment Fund and funding from Highlands & Islands Enterprise, the Crown Estate, the UK Energy Technologies Institute and Atlantis Resources. It will be the biggest tidal stream array in the world, with a total of 269 turbines.

FRACKING

The *BBC News* website reported that the Scottish energy minister, Fergus Ewing, said that any decision about fracking (hydraulic fracturing) should be taken at Holyrood, rather than Westminster. He will oppose moves to remove the right of householders to object to fracking companies drilling beneath their homes and said that the people of Scotland should be consulted.

The UK government is consulting on plans which would make it easier for firms to drill under residential areas. Companies would be given automatic access rights, but only for drilling at a depth of more than 1,000 feet (300 metres). Communities would receive a one-off payment of £20,000 for each well of more than 200 metres in length.

Mr Ewing said: "We are taking a cautious approach, yes, we are taking an evidence based approach. We are looking at matters further and if we decide that it may provide opportunities for Scotland, then perhaps it should be done in a controlled considered way, in appropriate parts of Scotland."

In a statement, United Kingdom Onshore Oil & Gas said: "The industry supports UK government proposals to give automatic access rights to underground land below 300 metres, bringing it in line with other industries such as water, gas, electricity and sewerage. This underground activity will not be noticeable at the surface and will not impact on the enjoyment landowners have of their property."

- *The Herald* reported that Ineos has bought a 51% share in an onshore oils and gas licence for shale gas exploration and development in Scotland [Jun 14]. The licence covers 329 km² of the Midland Valley. Grangemouth is being developed to import shale gas ethane from the USA, extracted by fracking.

SOLAR FARM

The *BBC News* website reported that BHA Enterprises plans a 40,000 panel solar farm at Huxton Bogbank, near Coldingham in the Scottish Borders. The company had initially planned a windfarm but following discussions with Scottish Borders Council it has opted to create a solar development.

The solar panels would be suspended above the ground to allow sheep grazing to continue on the land. A scoping request for the plans has been submitted to the local authority.

INVERGORDON INCINERATOR

Planning permission for Combined Power & Heat (Highlands) £43m waste incinerator in Invergordon was granted following a public inquiry [Nov 12]. Highland Council and Mohamed Al Fayed, of Ross Estates, challenged the decision.

The Lord President, Lord Gill, who heard the appeal at the Court of Session in Edinburgh with Lord Menzies and Lord Clarke, took the view that the inquiry must be reopened, but that to rehear the whole inquiry was unnecessary.

The judges ruled that a condition allowing the plant to accept a maximum of 100,000 tonnes of non-hazardous waste from within the Highland Council area, but also some from outside the region, should be examined. The condition was one of 16 attached to the planning consent granted by the Scottish Government planning reporter.

Combined Power & Heat (Highlands) has offered to place a restriction on the waste, but judges said that opponents to the scheme should be given a fair chance to make submissions.

RADIOACTIVE SLUDGE

Dounreay Site Restoration Limited (DSRL) notified the Scottish Environment Protection Agency of the detection of a small quantity of radioactivity in a sample of sludge taken from a manhole within a foul drain system, outwith and upstream of the Dounreay site in Caithness [Jul 14].

DSRL undertook subsequent analysis work to help determine the source of the radioactivity, and demonstrated that the radioactivity detected in the sludge is due to naturally occurring radionuclides and is not associated with Dounreay site activities.



RECREATION & TOURISM

GLENEAGLES ACCESS

Perth & Kinross Council, together with the Scottish Government, has approved special exemptions to restrict public access to land at Auchterarder next to the Gleneagles golf course. The restrictions came into force in August, although the Ryder Cup is not due to begin until 23 September.

Dave Morris, of Ramblers Scotland, said: "It is ridiculous that the public are being told that they cannot use their statutory rights of access to walk on land well outside the boundaries of the Gleneagles golf course simply because it might provide them with a view of a couple of holes on the Ryder Cup course. What next? Are the public going to be told they cannot walk up hills near to football stadiums or shinty grounds in case they get a view of the action on the nearby pitch?"

Ramblers and local residents say that the restrictions on public access are draconian and create a dangerous precedent.

Andy Wightman, the land rights campaigner, also criticised the restrictions as a gross overreaction. He said: "Auchterarder golf course is common land that belonged to local people. Commons are for the people and not for corporate elites."

The Ryder Cup is expected to attract 45,000 spectators each day and a TV audience of 600 million in 183 countries. A spokeswoman for Perth & Kinross Council said: "The closures are necessary to ensure the access to the event is strictly monitored and co-ordinated by the event organisers."

PEOPLE & THE MOUNTAINS

The Heritage Lottery Fund has granted £3.28m to Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park and the Cairngorms National Park for the People & the Mountains project. 41 eroded upland paths, covering a distance of 124.5 km, will be restored and upgraded. The project will train young people and work with schools and volunteers.

GREAT GLEN WAY

The Great Glen Way has been upgraded with a 17 km section of high level alternative. The £1m project, managed by Forestry Commission Scotland, moved the path higher up the hill above the tree line, taking walkers away from tree felling areas and opening up views to the north and south of Loch Ness.

The route, which is co-managed by Forestry Commission Scotland and Highland Council through the Great Glen Way Ranger Service was funded with 'shovel-ready money' from the Scottish Government.

See: www.greatglenway.com; www.scotland.forestry.gov.uk/visit/the-great-glen

SPEYSIDE WAY

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that Cairngorm Outdoor Access Trust has lodged several planning applications on behalf of the Cairngorms National Park Authority for the next stage of the extension of the Speyside Way long distance footpath south of Kincaig [Mar 14]. It is intended that the path will carry on to Newtonmore; it starts at Spey Bay in Moray.

GROUSE

The shooting season for red grouse runs from 12 August to 10 December. Tim Baynes, of Scottish Land & Estates' moorland group, said: "I think it seems pretty clear it has been a very good breeding season. It started early and there was a mild spring and summer. Nobody likes to make any rash predictions but I would say there is a bit more than quiet confidence it will be a very good year. It's not often you get a uniform good story across the country. The purple heather seems to be in good fettle ..."

"As Scotland's tourism minister recognised recently, Scotland has a global reputation for country sports which occupy an important position within the wider tourism industry. Apart from the tremendous economic benefit it is also important to underline the very substantial environmental contribution delivered by high-quality moorland management. Grouse moors typically have five times as many golden plover and lapwing and about twice as many curlews as other moors operating without that management regime."

Alex Hogg, of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, said: "The prospects for the season look good. The mix of weather has been right for the birds, which have feathered up well, there's been enough water and there has been a good insect hatch. It should secure a good season for sporting visitors which, in turn, helps small rural communities; the tourism businesses, shops and retailers that require the cash injection as we head into the less seasonal months."

This could mean more than £32m to the local economies. He said that the grouse moors were having another beneficial impact; heather management and predator control by gamekeepers, producing a harvestable surplus of grouse, for sport had been proven to provide benefits for ground-nesting wading species such as curlew and lapwing which have suffered alarming declines of 56% in 17 years.

• The *BBC News* website reported that the environment minister, Paul Wheelhouse, said: "The model of a shooting estate is changing in the 21st century and there is considerable potential for closer alignment of conservation and sporting interests than in the past. This is why we support the independently accredited Wildlife Estates Scotland scheme which, I hope, can in future signpost those intending to participate in a shoot to the growing number of estates that manage their grouse shooting or other sporting rights in harmony with wildlife, such as raptors – and steer away from the small number of operators who continue to harm our wildlife."

The League Against Cruel Sports has called on VisitScotland to end the promotion of Scotland as a destination for driven grouse shooting. In response, VisitScotland said it must remain impartial and could not 'discriminate' against one section of the tourism industry.



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

CO-OP FARMS

The Co-operative Group has sold its UK farm business for £249m to the Wellcome Trust. The sale includes 39,533 acres of land, 15 farms and more than 100 residential properties as well as some 27 commercial properties. The sale includes six sites across Scotland including Blairgowrie fruit farm in Perthshire, Carnoustie and Longforgan packing houses near Dundee and a complex of farms in the Borders [Apr 14]. Wellcome has significant property and agricultural holdings already and is 'ideally placed to develop and grow' the Co-op's farms and farm business.

FIELDS IN TRUST

Fields in Trust, which was formerly known as the National Playing Fields Association, was set up by King George V in 1925. The aim was to ensure that all people should have access to free, local, outdoor space for sport, play or recreation.

The group's flagship policy sets out to protect as many outdoor recreation spaces as possible as a celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the London Olympics and the Commonwealth Games.

Glasgow City Council officers have nominated 28 sites that they suggested should be covered by a legal agreement, including the Botanic Gardens, Cathkin Braes, Glasgow Green, Naseby Park, Garnethill Peoples Park and Bingham's Pond.

PILGRIMAGE GATHERING

The Scottish Pilgrimage Gathering has been organised jointly by the Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum and Forth Pilgrim with support from the Fife Tourism Partnership.

There will be an opening address from the Scottish Government's minister for environment outlining the national government strategy for the development of walking routes. It is to be held on 3 October, at the Vine Conference Centre in Dunfermline. See: www.scottishpilgrimagegathering.co.uk

RSPB

The Sunday Herald reported that RSPB Scotland is, allegedly, to move from Hopetoun House estate, near South Queensferry on the Firth of Forth, for the annual Scottish Birdfair. RSPB Scotland has staged the fair at Hopetoun for three years. Duncan Orr-Ewing, of RSPB Scotland, said: "We are indeed reviewing the location for the 2015 Scottish Birdfair and are deliberating over the future venue."

Lord Hopetoun also owns the Leadhills grouse shooting estate in South Lanarkshire, which has one of Scotland's worst records for wildlife crime. More than 40 incidents have been reported since 2003, including convictions for laying poisoned bait and the shooting of an owl [Apr 14]. RSPB Scotland, however, defended Lord Hopetoun, saying he did not condone illegal practices on his land and that there was a clear separation between Hopetoun House and Leadhills. Leadhills has been on long-term lease to a sporting company registered in the USA, and this is now up for renewal.

Some bird lovers had boycotted the fair in the past, in protest.