

for further engagement with Wildcat Haven.”

Chris West, of RZSS, said: “Unfortunately, it has become increasingly clear that Wildcat Haven – with its opaque and divisive approach – is hampering rather than helping efforts to save the Scottish wildcat from extinction. With the very survival of the species at stake, we believe that the open, collaborative approach taken by the Scottish Wildcat Action partnership is the only sensible way forward. Regrettably, Wildcat Haven continues to operate apart from the rest of Scottish conservation.”

Chris Packham, the BBC wildlife presenter, said that personalities were getting in the way of conservation. He said: “Wildcat Haven not only damages the name of conservation, it sends national efforts backwards instead of forwards. Looking at population estimates for the Scottish wildcat over recent years, it is clear they are edging closer to extinction, which is an unbearable thought. We must ask ourselves what now for the future of the species? Breeding for reintroduction may prove to be one of the few remaining lifelines left for this species.”

The Sunday Herald reported that the Woodland Trust Scotland said that it was nominated as a key support body for Wildcat Action, without its knowledge. The trust has written to Wildcat Haven asking to be removed as a nominated body.

See: <http://bit.ly/1NaOfD0>

LYNX

The Lynx UK Trust launched a national consultation for farmers and landowners on a trial reintroduction of the cat at several sites in the UK, including Aberdeenshire and Argyll [Oct 15]. A report for the trust suggested that there would be minimal negative impacts on farming, as lynx prefer to hunt deer rather than livestock or domestic pets. However, Phil Stocker, of the National Sheep Association, raised concerns that the introduction of lynx would jeopardise the ‘already fragile state’ of the sheep farming industry. He said that lynx were unpredictable in their hunting and while there was likely to be low levels of sheep kills by lynx in areas where deer numbers were high, any premature death was unacceptable to farmers.

Lynx could also kill more sheep than they needed to feed themselves, and the impact of their presence could pose a welfare issue to the livestock.

Mr Stocker pointed to the similarities between the threat the lynx would pose to sheep and lambs and the issue of dog attacks on the animals. He said: “Attacks by dog cause sheep to miscarry their unborn lambs, to be separated from baby lambs once they are born, and to fail to thrive due to high levels of stress. It would be the same with the lynx. Poorer animal welfare is just one of many problems lynx would create if they were introduced. Decision-makers must consider this, along with other, wider consequences and seriously consider the detail, not just be taken in by the general appeal of having a big cat in our countryside.”

HEN HARRIERS

The public is being asked to report any hen harrier sightings this year by the ‘Heads Up for Harriers’ project group, run by the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW Scotland) [Aug 15].

A number of causes, including illegal persecution, land use changes and predation, have resulted in a reduction in hen harrier numbers. Building upon the successes of 2015, when ten young hen harriers fledged from five

participating estates, the Heads Up for Harriers group is extending the project across Scotland. Nest cameras are being used to monitor breeding success at these nests and to help determine some possible causes for any breeding failure.

Professor Des Thompson, of the Heads Up for Harriers group, explained: “The information gained from the Heads Up for Harriers project will feed into the national survey being carried out this year. At the last survey, six years ago, Scotland had around 500 pairs of hen harriers. Based on the amount of suitable habitat and prey species available, we know that the natural carrying capacity is much higher than this. With luck, the survey will reveal an increase in numbers.”

Tim Baynes, of Scottish Land & Estates, said: “The Heads Up for Harriers project brings together land managers and harrier experts to work towards the common aim of conserving this special bird. It is by working together that we can understand the reasons for failure and – where identified – promote the recovery of hen harriers in Scotland. So far this year, 11 estates have agreed to participate in the project. This is twice as many as last year and includes estates in Angus, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Highland and Dumfries and Galloway, giving good coverage of Scotland. The estates involved include both walked-up and driven grouse moor, and unmanaged moorland, which helps give us a better representation of land use where harriers nest.”

Email sightings to HenHarrier@snh.gov.uk; telephone: 07767 671973. Please provide a six-figure grid reference, the time and date of sighting and any notes on behaviour.

See: <http://bit.ly/1TwdgYZ>

JNCC REPORT

The Sunday Herald reported that the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), which advises all UK governments, publishes reports every five years recommending changes to legal protection of endangered species. Its reports in 2002 and 2008 urged stronger measures to combat threats from development, pollution and commercial exploitation. However, ministers have failed to give legal protection to ten of the country’s most endangered species. The JNCC’s most recent review was submitted to the Scottish Government in April 2014 but has yet to be published.

Among the species highlighted by JNCC were the talisker burnet moth, only found on Skye, and the slender Scotch burnet moth found around parts of Mull and Ulva. The JNCC has been recommending since 2002 that they both get protection under schedule five of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act to deter them from being taken by collectors. Similar protection was recommended for two hoverflies; the pine hoverfly, found only at two sites on Speyside and the aspen hoverfly found in Strathspey and a few other parts of Scotland. The Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group said that the aspen hoverfly has been badly hit by recent damage to native woodlands at Grantown-on-Spey, a known breeding site. It said that this unnecessary loss might have been avoided had the Scottish Government been more diligent in acting on the longstanding expert advice from JNCC and had agencies been more proactive in pursuing invertebrate conservation in Scotland.

The JNCC’s 2008 report recommended better protection for two lichens by including them on schedule eight of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Rock nail lichen is found on tombstones in Midlothian, while tree lungwort is found in the Celtic rain forest. Greater protection was also recommended for the spiny seahorse and the short-snouted seahorse. They are both at risk of

being captured for use in traditional medicine or for display in aquariums. Water voles and a fish, twaite shad, found in the Solway Firth were also recommended for protection.

Craig Macadam, of Buglife, said: “The Scottish Government’s failure to act on the recommendations from these reviews is akin to gambling with our most threatened wildlife.”

Dr Deborah Long, of Plantlife Scotland, said: “[The legislation] urgently needs updating to list species that are at threat of extinction and it needs to reflect today’s threats. So far, it’s taken the Scottish Government 12 years to consider yet not implement changes to schedule eight recommended by JNCC. During this time, Scotland’s species have continued to decline in numbers and distribution. Ironically, this decline continues while we see more reliance on wildlife for tourism and more frequent wildlife programmes on TV. The disconnect between what we like to see and how we care for it is stark.”

In addition, the JNCC has called for better protection for angel and porbeagle sharks, some species of skate, the undulate ray and the spiny dogfish. In response, the Scottish Government introduced a new law in 2012 to protect them from fishing, though they are still not protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Many of these species grow slowly, mature late and have few offspring, so remain among the most threatened species in Scottish seas.

Calum Duncan, of the Marine Conservation Society Scotland, said: “The Scottish Government must do more to protect important feeding and nursery areas from damaging fishing gear, to limit by-catch and to encourage development of fishing gears that catch fewer non-target species. This makes it even more important that we use existing marine protected areas to provide wider ecosystem benefit, not just to protect habitat patches within them.”

Mairi Cole, of SNH, said: “Some species have been approved in principle for protection and are awaiting the appropriate order to be laid before parliament to complete the process. There are many ways to protect species though, and listing on the Wildlife and Countryside Act in Scotland is not always the most effective action.” She said that a joint UK working group had identified ‘appropriate site protection and habitat management’ as key actions for many species: “In these cases, more can be achieved by partnership working on sites than by specific legal protection, and we will continue to identify practical actions to achieve this.”

A Scottish Government spokeswoman highlighted the legislation that it had introduced in 2012 to protect some marine wildlife from fishing. She said: “The other species recommended for protection continue to be considered for inclusion in schedules five and eight of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.”

PINE MARTENS & SQUIRRELS

Research by Aberdeen University has suggested that pine martens could be used to help control invasive grey squirrels and help protect native red squirrels.

Pine martens are native to Scotland and so could offer a new approach to controlling grey squirrels, introduced from North America in the late 19th century. The greys reproduced rapidly and crowded out the red squirrel.

Pine martens were protected in Ireland in the 1970s. Emma Sheehy, of Aberdeen University, said: “Since then they have expanded considerably, moving back into the midlands of Ireland. As they have repopulated central Ireland, the grey squirrel population has declined and the reds have come back. Our hypothesis is that pine martens drive out the greys – so as the martens get more abundant the grey squirrel population declines. We don’t know if this is due to the martens eating grey squirrels

or just scaring them away, but it points to a new solution for protecting red squirrels.”

Dr Sheehy is now applying her research to Loch Lomond and The Trossachs and is also studying the resurgence of pine martens in the Scottish Borders. Any initiative to encourage marten populations would take time to have a major impact on grey squirrel numbers, and traditional tactics like trapping and shooting are still important.



FARMING

RAVENS

The Herald reported that a petition calling for ‘general licences’ to be issued for the killing of ravens has been started by a pest control shooter, Danny Bissett. He said there had been an upsurge in attacks on ewes and lambs, in part because the bird has no natural predators and that it holds a protected status. The petition states: “The manner in which colonies of the common raven have been allowed to grow, uncontrolled would call into question whether the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) have any idea as to what is being witnessed on the ground on a daily basis throughout the farming community, which is massed flocks of this species targeting both in lamb ewes and new born lambs. Currently demonstrated instances where SNH have issued landowners with a licence to take two ravens when the issue is a flock of thirty is laughable and in no way meet the requirements of those who face multiple deaths of their livestock on a daily basis.”

The *BBC News* website said that around 2,200 names had been added to the petition so far.

George Milne, of the National Sheep Association, said: “We could do with being able to kill ravens as and when we need to. They put the young lambs under severe difficulties and stress to the mothers trying to protect their young. They work in large numbers and the lambs have no chance. I know of lambs being born, alive, yet with their tongues and eyes torn out. Allowing a sensible policy would be a huge advantage to sheep farmers.”

Robbie Kernahan, of SNH, said: “We already regularly issue specific licences to shoot ravens to prevent damage to livestock where there is no other satisfactory solution. So, if anyone is suffering serious damage to livestock, then of course they can apply – but any licence we issue to shoot ravens is done so as part of an overall scaring programme – and is not intended to cull the population, but to deter them.”

An RSPB Scotland spokeswoman said: “SNH regularly issue licences to farmers to kill ravens for livestock protection and it is therefore completely unnecessary to put raven on the general licence, which would result in poorly regulated, unrestricted killing of ravens. It should be remembered that ravens in the east of Scotland are only now recovering from historical eradication and would once again be vulnerable to local extinction if SNH allowed the free-for-all that the petition seeks.”

The Raptor Persecution Scotland blog reported that Bert Burnett, of the Scottish Gamekeepers’ Association, said: “Ravens, no matter where you go now in our countryside you have every chance to see or hear ravens, but they are not like small children who as the saying goes ‘should be seen and not heard,’ if you see them they will be doing damage and even if you hear them they will be planning damage”.

There are around 6,000 breeding pairs of raven in Scotland. Most of people who have signed the

petition are involved in agriculture, several of whom claimed that small farm holdings cannot sustain the financial loss from raven attacks.

• The *BBC News* website reported that farmers in Caithness and Sutherland have called for greater controls of ravens which have been feeding on young livestock. Ravens can be shot under licence, but farmers say the rules of the permits are too restrictive. SNH, which issues the licences, has asked farmers to contribute to a review of the permits. Last year, SNH issued 120 licences and more than 500 ravens were shot. The farmers told *BBC Alba* of ravens flocking in numbers of up to 30 birds and of them feeding on lambs’ eyes and tongues.

FARM RENTS

Scotland’s chief statistician published figures which show that the average cost of renting agricultural land has risen by 3% since last year. The average rent for land was £39 per hectare in 2014/15 compared to £38 per hectare the previous year. The increase was seen in both the poorer-quality Less Favoured Area land, which was up 3% from £25 to £26 per hectare, and in the better quality land which rose by 5% from £124 to £130 per hectare. Most rents are reviewed only every three years; rent increases have been above inflation since 2008.

The new figures were highest in Fife and the Lothians, with three quarters paying over £75 per hectare. They were lowest in Shetland and the Western Isles where half of rents were less than £3 per hectare. This was even after crofts were excluded from the analysis, and is explained by their remoteness and poor quality of land. However Orkney showed higher rents, demonstrating that location alone does not drive prices, with Orkney’s strong cattle and cereal sectors being reflected in more costly land..

Christopher Nicholson, of the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association, said that the rent increase figures showed that the current open market rent test is failing the sector, and that measures in the Land Reform Bill to allow fair rents linked to farm profitability are long overdue.

Gemma Thomson, of NFU Scotland, said: “Given the huge pressure on farm businesses at this time, it is difficult to envisage any circumstances that would support an increase in rents. There remains a disconnect between farm rents and farm profitability and we recognise that all sectors of the agricultural industry re going through a torrid time with commodity prices at an historic low.”

David Johnstone, of Scottish Land & Estates, said: “There has been a small percentage increase in farm rents over this period, an increase which is lower than previous years. It is clear, however, that the overwhelming majority of rent reviews are being agreed amicably between the landlord and tenant and we believe the joint guidance will help to cement this position in the future. The statistics also demonstrate that there continues to be strong demand for agricultural land and the majority of rents continue to be good value. This shows the importance of having a thriving tenanted sector in Scotland – but it is this sector which may well have been undermined by the Land Reform Bill.”

NEONICOTINOIDS

A joint Dundee and St Andrews University study, the biggest study of its kind, has shown that the three neonicotinoids, banned because of the risks to bumblebees, act differently on bees’ brains and produce different effects on colonies [Feb 16].

The research involved the study of 75 bumblebee colonies at five sites, ranging from arable land to

the Highlands. Two of the pesticides, imacloprid and thiamethoxam, reduced the number of brood cells, the number of live bees and the proportion of females. The only significant impact of clothianidin was the potential benefit of increasing the number of queens in a colony. Clothianidin is the most potent of the three neonics.

Dr Chris Connolly, of Dundee University, said that it was premature to place a permanent ban on clothianidin as it has not been fully studied and does not appear to harm bumblebees. He suggested judging the neonics separately and extending the moratorium on clothianidin use until more was known about impacts on other insects.



WOODLANDS

LOCH ARKAIG

The Woodland Trust (WT) Scotland is launching a £500,000 appeal to purchase the Loch Arkaig Pine Forest near Spean Bridge. The forest, said to be in a ‘degraded condition,’ covers 2,500 acres and is an ancient Caledonian Pine Forest. WT Scotland will work with the Loch Arkaig Community Forest to restore the forest back to native woodland; Arkaig Community Forest will take over the ownership of 120 acres of the woodland.

The forest is being sold as surplus through the National Forest Land Scheme.

BIRNAM WOOD

The *BBC News* website reported that a campaign is being launched to save two ancient trees, the Birnam Oak and Sycamore, damaged during Storm Desmond in December 2015. Severe flooding occurred in the Birnam Woods, near Dunkeld in Perthshire and subsequent ultrasound scans have revealed damage to the trees and soil around them. The Birnam Oak could split in two because its trunk is rotten but its heavy branches are still growing and pulling it apart with their weight. The sycamore is also weak and has a hollow trunk. Branches will be shortened to reduce the strain on the tree trunks, with dead branches also being removed.

Morag Watson, of Perth & Kinross Countryside Trust, said: “It was agreed that a phased approach to actions to be undertaken regarding the trees is best. This will enable us to prioritise the most urgent remedial arboricultural works which are to safeguard the trees. These are likely to now go ahead in the next few weeks. Further works, including new supports for the oak, and improvements to the path, will be undertaken later this year and into 2017 following further research and community consultation.”

The trees are thought to be the sole survivors from the medieval forest made famous by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, and attract thousands of visitors a year.



FISHFARMING & FISHERIES

FISHFARM MORTALITIES

The Sunday Herald reported that, for years, the caged salmon industry has been allowed to dispose of diseased fish in landfill sites because of a loophole in public health law. From 1 January, salmon farms must abide by the rules introduced in the wake of the outbreak of mad cow disease (BSE) in the 1980s. Fishfarms now have to incinerate, sterilise or compost their wastes, and not just use landfill sites.

Scotland’s fishfarming industry has many millions of salmon mortalities annually, either caused by disease, excess medication or other

causes. According to figures from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), over the last three years some 38,800 tonnes of dead fish have been recorded at fishfarms across Scotland.

Between August 2011 and June 2012, 82,663 salmon deaths from disease were recorded at Ardmaddy fishfarm in Seil Sound, Argyll. A local environmental group, Save Seil Sound, asked what had happened to the resulting 257 tonnes of dead fish but no-one seemed to know. In 2013, the group lodged a formal complaint with the European Commission. The response, received in March 2016, revealed that UK and Scottish authorities had changed the rules in order to avoid breaching European law, and incurring a fine. Ewan Kennedy, of Save Seil Sound, said that virtually the whole of the west coast of Scotland had been exempted from the BSE rules. He said: "The consequences of a total lack of policing could range from untreated toxic waste ending up exposed in landfill sites to the risk that a farm operator might process the dead salmon into fishmeal and feed it back into the system. Four years on, the European Commission has agreed with us."

Douglas Sinclair, of SEPA, pointed out that the disposal of dead fish was regulated by other authorities. He said: "SEPA does provide advice and guidance to these bodies and in some instances SEPA authorises facilities to accept fish waste for disposal. SEPA is aware of the change to the disposal routes for fishfarm mortalities and welcomes the fact that such waste will not be routinely disposed of into landfill without prior treatment."

Scott Landsburgh, of Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation, said: "These [regulations] have been updated to allow recycling and other environmentally friendly methods such as anaerobic digestion, in-vessel composting in addition to rendering plants. The industry has found these changes helpful. The animal health division at Scottish Government is the responsible authority for this matter. A report on disposal routes has been commissioned by Marine Scotland and Zero Waste Scotland and will be published on the Marine Scotland website."

The Scottish Government pointed out that animal byproducts had to be disposed of in a safe and sustainable way. "To comply with European legislation, the Scottish Government introduced the Animal By-Products (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2015 to change how fish mortalities and other aquaculture waste can be disposed of in the areas categorised as remote. From 1 January, fishfarms located in remote areas can no longer dispose of their waste in a landfill site and will now need to ensure that it is being disposed of in accordance with legislation, such as sending it for incineration, pressure sterilisation, or using it in composting or anaerobic digestion."

LOCH LOMOND ANGLING

The Herald reported that the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association (LLAIA) claims that the Scottish Government's ban on taking home any of the salmon caught, introduced on 1 April, was based on flawed research. The government designated the Lomond fishery as being in the lowest category, meaning anglers can still catch salmon but cannot take the fish home with them.

The statistics that led to the ban were based on the rod catches for each fishery in the previous five years. Anglers claim that the survey figures are no more than a 'guesstimate' and the formula is an imperfect method of calculating fish stocks.

Last season, Lomond anglers claim to have returned 70% of the salmon and over 90% of the sea trout they caught.

Dick Dickson, of LLAIA, said: "The only reliable scientific method of accurately calculating fish stocks is electronic fish counters strategically located on a river. It is very clear that the government's figures are flawed. Put simply, they do not have a clue how many fish run into Loch Lomond and its tributaries. Will this legislation have the effect of criminalising an angler who for example keeps a salmon which after being caught is dying and cannot recover? This ban is draconian and this been rightly greeted with universal unease by the angling community. We are angered by the fundamental unfairness of it. Ominously for the government there are mutterings amongst anglers of non-compliance."

Jackie Baillie MSP said that the government had 'rushed headlong' into a ban without considering the impact on angling clubs.

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: "We remain confident that the science and the policy for these measures is robust, and certainly comparable to many other countries who have introduced similar measures. However, we do aim to improve the detail of the categorisation and will continue to listen and consider any additional information that might support a re-categorisation of a fishery district. We believe these regulations strike the right balance between conservation of the species for the benefit of future generations, and the interests of those who fish for salmon today."

DORNOCH FIRTH MUSSELS

Mussel fishing rights within the Dornoch Firth were granted to Tain, Easter Ross in 1612. Ross & Cromarty District Council took over the fishery in the 1980s and this responsibility later passed to Highland Council. The fishery is among the assets of the Tain Common Good and includes the fishing rights, a boat and fishing licence. Council officials have recommended leasing the rights to a third party operator and selling the boat and equipment.

SALMON & SEA TROUT

Scotland's chief statistician has published the salmon and sea trout fishery statistics for the 2015 season.

The total reported rod catch (retained and released) of salmon for 2015 is 54,969, a slight improvement on the 2014 total. Reported rod catch in 2015 remains 69% of the previous five year average. The proportion of the rod catch accounted for by catch and release is the highest reported since these figures were first recorded in 1994. In 2015, 98% of rod caught spring salmon was released, as was 84% of the annual rod catch.

Trends in rod catch vary among individual stock components. Reported catch of spring salmon shows a general decline since records began and, although there is some indication that catch has stabilised in recent years, it remains at a historically low level. Overall catch of salmon and grilse in later months, on the other hand, showed a general increase up to 2010, after which it fell sharply over the next four years before recovering slightly in 2015.

Catch and effort for both fixed engine and net & coble fisheries remain at historically low levels. Reported catch in each fishery was 10,349 and 3,234 - 4% and 1% of the maximum reported in the respective time series. Fishing effort in these fisheries was 127 trap months and 57 crew months; the lowest and second lowest, respectively, since records began in 1952.

The total reported rod catch of sea trout (retained and released) for 2015 is 21,443. Although catches have declined over much of the period since 1952, when records began, they appear to have stabilised in recent years and in 2015 were 96% of the previous five year average.

The proportion of the rod catch accounted for by catch and release in 2015 is 79%, the second highest reported since these figures were first recorded in 1994.

Catch and effort for both fixed engine and net & coble fisheries remain at historically low levels for sea trout. Reported catch in each fishery was 1,521 and 2,760 - 3% and 1% of the maximum reported in the respective time series. Fishing effort in these fisheries was 127 trap months and 57 crew months; the lowest and second lowest, respectively, since records began in 1952.

The data was collected and collated by Marine Scotland Science. See: <http://bit.ly/1WK61PI>

SOLWAY FIRTH

The BBC News website reported that the Annan Common Good Fund is being asked by Marine Scotland to submit a compensation claim for the losses it believes it will incur; it holds the rights to traditional fishing methods such as haaf, poke and stake netting in much of the area. It is also being asked to agree take part in scientific research which will allow some salmon to be caught. A three-year ban is in place on killing fish outside the Solway Firth limits with strict controls on numbers in inland waters [Mar 16]. The annual cost of the regulations is estimated to be nearly £17,000.



MARINE

ARRAN BEACH

The Herald reported that Brodick Improvements Committee (BIC) has been given 10,000 tonnes of free sand by the contractors dredging for an upgraded harbour at Brodick on the Isle of Arran. 30 years ago, a commercial development took sand off the beach and sold it to Saudi Arabia for water filtration. Easterly storms then eroded the beach and exposed landfill that had been there for centuries. The south end of Brodick Bay ended up with no beach. BIC has applied for a licence from Marine Scotland to put in groyne on the beach to hold the 'new' sand.

WEST COAST ORCAS

A killer whale (orca) swam up the River Foyle in Northern Ireland in November 1977. Known as Dopey Dick, efforts to persuade it to return to the open sea failed. The whale has now been spotted living off Scotland's west coast, part of the vulnerable west coast community of orcas, which has just eight members. Archive images of the animal's dorsal fin were used to confirm the identification. Now known as Comet, he was an adult male in 1977 so he is at least 58 years old.

Dr Conor Ryan, of the Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust, said: "Since records began in the 1980s, we haven't had any new animals join the population and we haven't had new calves either. The population is declining because as the older animals die, they're not being replaced. We're concerned that they're going to become extinct, possibly even in our lifetime."

The trust said the discovery that Dopey Dick was in fact Comet is significant to understanding the age of the west coast group.

MINCH SAC

The West Highland Free Press reported that a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) has been proposed for the protection of harbour porpoise in the Minch

[Jan 16]. The area covers from Jura to Lochinver, including the east coast of the Western Isles from Broad Bay in Lewis to the southern tip of South Uist, including the entire coastline of Wester Ross and all of Skye. SNH said: "The Minch is an area with high predicted and observed densities of harbour porpoise. The area included within the site covers important summer habitat, where the density of animals has been shown to be consistently above average." Although harbour porpoise are thriving in the Minches, SNH said that the SAC is required to protect their habitat and prey species such as whiting.

Duncan MacInnes, of the Western Isles Fishermen's Association (WIFA), said that the association did not agree with the suggested management measures for the site, and was meeting the Outer Hebrides Inshore Fisheries Group to formalise a response.

Southern Hebrides Against Marine Environmental Designations (SHAMED) said that, in addition to the sheer size of the proposed site, some areas of the Minch will have three or four designations stacked one on top of the other, such as around the Small Isles and around Coll and Tiree. The Sound of Barra SAC will also be overlaid by a much larger Special Protection Area for birds, affecting communities from Harris to Vatersay. Angus Macleod, of SHAMED, said that an SNH spokesman confirmed that the local community would not be involved in site management because the site covered such a large area. The SAC proposal is out for consultation which will conclude on 18 May; however, no public consultation meetings are to be held because of the 'overlap with the election period.'

SOUND OF BARRA SAC

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that a letter has been sent to Marine Scotland by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar concerning the lack of progress to ensure local input on the management of the Sound of Barra SAC [Feb 14]. The Scottish Government awarded a grant to Voluntary Action Barra & Vatersay to carry out a consultation and come up with recommendations, but only £3,400 of the £40,000 allocation was been drawn down before the grant expired. A draft report was sent by the action group to the Scottish Government in December, but was still under revision.'

There is uncertainty over how the new fishing regulations will be managed, and just what level of community involvement will be achieved. The designation protects common (harbour) seals, reefs and sandbanks and was opposed by local fishermen.

Duncan MacInnes, of WIFA, said that WIFA had not been consulted on drawing up a management plan for the SAC, and said that local fishermen had been 'excluded from the process.' Marine Scotland's intention to ban scallop dredging within the Sound of Barra would have a devastating impact on the local economy; scallop dredging in the Sound accounts for around 20% by value of all scallops landed in the Western Isles.



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

LINK HUSTINGS

Scottish Environment LINK held a hustings, 'Environment Matters.' Each of the five main parties in the Scottish Parliament debated their 2016 manifestos. LINK president, Joyce McMillan, said: "From the land reform debate to vital questions about health, energy policy, sustainable jobs, and the future of Scotland's

magnificent landscape and wildlife, environmental matters are at the very heart of Scottish political debate, as we approach the Holyrood elections in May."

She summarised the discussions noting there was a lot of consensus on where Scotland needs to be by 2030 or 2050 but what is lacking is a common agreement on how to get there.

See: <http://bit.ly/1YMu66s>

MANIFESTOS

In advance of the forthcoming Scottish Parliament elections, The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) has published *A better Scotland, for all of Scotland* in which it invited political parties and their candidates to find ways to:

- Encourage the enjoyment of our heritage
- Recognise heritage as an asset
- Make Scotland a better place to live

Among the proposals in this 'manifesto' are:

- A Passport to Nature – a scheme that would guarantee that all 8-15 year-olds would have the opportunity to visit a National Park or National Nature Reserve within the lifetime of the coming Parliament

- Communities to be given an equal right of appeal in planning processes, in order to offset the advantages of finance and legal advice that developers enjoy

- A Greenspace Guarantee in order to maintain and ensure access to greenspaces, especially for our most deprived communities

- A national conversation about a national landscape vision that finds consensus on ways to incorporate renewable energy into Scotland's landscapes in a co-ordinated way without destroying the very habitats we want to protect from climate change

See: <http://bit.ly/1RV10Bt>

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCofS) has written to the chairs of Scotland's main political parties asking them to state their views on six priorities for Scotland's mountains. MCofS has sent its election briefing, *A Sustainable Future for Scotland's Mountains*, to over 250 parliamentary candidates.

MCofS's six key priorities are:

- To develop a shared vision for Scotland's uplands, which should be treated as an irreplaceable natural, cultural and economic asset, respected and safeguarded for the benefit of all

- To support sustainable economic development for mountain communities, which need support and investment to diversify and develop

- To enforce existing legal powers and safeguard Scotland's access rights, which are so essential for the nation's health and wellbeing, but which are under threat of erosion

- Guaranteed planning protection for mountain landscapes, so that development is planned and regulated to enhance rather than diminish our mountain landscapes and wild land

- To capitalise on the health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor recreation, with these being promoted in both education and health services

- A commitment to improving safety in the mountains. A sector-wide Mountain Safety Group, led by the MCofS, is developing a strategy for improving safety in Scotland's mountains, and Government investment in safety services such as mountain weather and avalanche forecasts, training and mountain rescue plays a vital part in this and must continue.

See: <http://bit.ly/1Xeiw3P>

NFU Scotland produced 40 bullet points in advance of the election which it would like

new MSPs to address. These include the need for appropriate environmental and land management systems and a crofting system fit for the 21st century.

Allan Bowie, of NFU Scotland, said: "With 85% of Scotland's land activity managed and farmed, and agriculture the biggest employer in rural areas, these elections come at an unprecedented time for our industry. The new Scottish Parliament has the ability to unlock the shackles that are placed on farming, helping it in its role as the biggest driver of the rural economy ... That 'can-do' attitude could include starting with a clean slate in relation to complex crofting regulation, simplifying the rules around common grazings and developing a framework that is fit for the wants and needs of modern-day crofting."

WINDFARM SUBSIDIES

The Herald reported that the House of Lords has backed a new opposition amendment to the Energy Bill, which would allow 'a few' projects in Scotland, which have already been given initial planning permission, to go ahead. The House of Commons had already been defeated twice by peers over the early withdrawal of subsidies for onshore windfarms [Sep 15].

BARVAS ESTATE

Community landlords Urras Sgìre Oighreachd Bharabhais have purchased 33,000 acres from the Barvas Estate on Lewis [Feb 15]. The estate was previously owned by the Duckworth family; the community buyout excludes the islands of Sula Sgeir and North Rona.

The 300 strong community wants to build 40 affordable homes, a five turbine community windfarm and an environmental interpretation centre.



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

HEBRIDEAN CHOUGHS

60 breeding pairs of red-billed choughs nest on Colonsay and Islay. Research by Aberdeen University, published in the *Journal of Animal Ecology*, has shown that newly hatched chicks are being born blind due to inbreeding on the islands. Once they leave the nest, they are unable to care for themselves and die.

GOLDEN PLOVERS

The *BBC News* website reported that a five year study, funded by SSE and conducted by RSPB Scotland, took place on the Gordonbush windfarm in Sutherland. The study monitored golden plover numbers before, during and after construction. The report concluded that there had been an 80% decrease in numbers on the windfarm site in the first two years of operation, greater than in areas surrounding the windfarm over the same period.

Dr Alex Sansom, of RSPB Scotland, said: "Golden plovers breed in open landscapes and it is likely that the presence of wind turbines in these areas leads to birds avoiding areas around the turbines. This study shows that such displacement may cause large declines in bird numbers within windfarms. It will be important to examine whether these effects are maintained over the longer term at this site, and we should also use these detailed studies to examine the effects of windfarms on other bird species."

Aedán Smith, of RSPB Scotland, said: "This important study shows that bird numbers can be seriously affected by badly-sited windfarms in more ways than simply colliding with turbine blades, and

highlights the importance of getting things right at the outset, so that impacts can be avoided.”

A spokesman for SSE said: “Long-term studies at other Scottish windfarms have generally shown that golden plover numbers are not adversely affected by wind turbines, and we have a long-term habitat management plan in place at Gordonbush. SSE regards itself as a responsible developer that always engages with all relevant bodies, including Scottish Natural Heritage, with respect to our ongoing environmental obligations.”

Kenna Chisholm, of RSPB Scotland said: “RSPB Scotland objected to this project when it was first proposed, stating that it was not a suitable site for a windfarm. The new research suggests that the site is unlikely to be suitable for repowering when the current windfarm reaches the end of its life.”

Golden plover, of which there are believed to be between 38,000 and 59,000 breeding pairs in the UK, are protected under the European Birds Directive.

See: <http://bit.ly/1My161H>

WILDLIFE CRIME PROSECUTION

The *BBC News* website reported that head gamekeeper Craig Graham has been charged at Forfar Sheriff Court with repeatedly setting an illegal pole trap on the Brewlands and Kilry Estate in the Angus Glens. The trap was baited with a pheasant carcass, with the intention of killing or taking a wild bird.

GENERAL LICENCE RESTRICTIONS

SNH served two General Licence Restriction Orders on the Raeshaw Estate and Burnfoot Estate in response to alleged raptor persecution crimes [Feb 16]. The restriction orders were due to run for three years and would restrict the killing of certain ‘pest’ species (such as crows) that are usually permitted under the General Licence. However, the restriction orders initially only lasted for six days because the estates appealed the decision. SNH reinstated the restriction orders after dismissing the estates’ appeals.

The *Raptor Persecution Scotland* blog reported that Raeshaw Estate has now successfully applied for a Judicial Review, which is to be heard in May. The review will decide if SNH acted lawfully and followed the right procedures when it made the decision to apply General Licence restriction orders to these two estates, the first time that the restrictions had ever been applied. The restriction order on Raeshaw Estate has once again been suspended while the Judicial Review is underway. The Burnfoot Estate is not directly involved in the Judicial Review, and consequently, the General Licence restriction order on the Burnfoot Estate is still in place; the estate is not permitted to kill ‘pest’ species as it would have done under the General Licence.

EDINBURGH TOADS

Over 2,100 toads are making the annual migration, from Arthur’s Seat in Holyrood Park in Edinburgh, to Dunsapie Loch to spawn. Historic Environment Scotland have closed roads on Arthur’s Seat at night, put grills over drains and laid on ‘toad patrols’ by the park rangers to carry them down the hill by hand. The migration usually lasts for two weeks, beginning around the end of March. However, the unseasonable weather this year meant that the migration began on 26 March and lasted for more than two weeks after it was due to finish.

WILDFIRES

A large grass fire between Barrhill and Newton Stewart in Dumfries & Galloway was brought under control. At its peak, one metre-high flames

burned across more than 600 metres of grassland as fire crews fought to protect a nearby forest.

The Scottish Fire & Rescue Service said that dry conditions at this time of year easily resulted in wildfires that damaged the environment and devastated wildlife habitat.

WOLVES & LYNX

The Herald reported that Sir David Attenborough said that reintroducing lost species, such as lynx and wolves, could be one step too far. Speaking to the BBC magazine *Focus*, he said: “We have got a lot of problems even keeping alive what is already here. Admittedly, putting beavers back [in the wild] seems relatively innocuous. But I feel we’ve got enough on our plate. The world [human] population has tripled since I first started making programmes in the 1950s. That’s the huge change.”



ENERGY

ISLAND WINDFARMS

Scottish Renewables has warned that investment in windfarms in the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland is at risk, as the UK Department of Energy & Climate Change remains in talks with the European Commission concerning the Remote Island Wind Contract for Difference subsidies [Apr 14]. The subsidy was designed to overcome the large grid charges faced by electricity generation on the islands. Windfarms have been approved on the islands but cannot go ahead as there is no transmission infrastructure to the mainland.

ORKNEY HYDROGEN

The *BBC News* website reported that a pilot project, Big Hit, to develop the use of hydrogen fuel technology in Orkney has been awarded €2m from the EU. A device which converts electricity to hydrogen fuel will be installed, using an electrolyser to convert excess electricity generated on the islands. As part of the project, ten electric vans will be fitted with equipment to use the hydrogen fuel to extend their range.

WINDFARMS & MICROCLIMATE

The *BBC News* website reported that the first study of the climatic effect of an onshore windfarm on the local environment has been undertaken. Professor Stephen Mobbs, of the National Centre for Atmospheric Science at the University of Leeds, studied Black Law windfarm near Shotts in North Lanarkshire. Black Law has been operating since 2005 with 54 turbines, one of the UK’s largest arrays of onshore turbines.

Temperature and humidity sensors were installed across the 18.6 km² site. He said: “We had a fantastic opportunity when [the operators] turned the windfarm off for several months for some major maintenance. What we were able to do, which had not been possible before, is to compare the effects with and without the turbines rotating.”

There was a very slight warming at ground level when the windfarm was operating. It was localised to within the windfarm’s perimeter, with no adverse ecological effects. Even in the most extreme conditions, the warming was no more than 0.2°C.

Professor Mobbs said: “What happens on clear nights is that the ground surface cools as a result of radiation to space and you get a layer of cold air close to the ground – this has been well-known for a hundred years or so. On such nights, if you were to go up a tower, *etc*, to the height of a turbine (approximately 70 metres), then you would find a natural difference in temperature – up to a few

degrees warmer than it was at the ground. This is perfectly natural. If you put a rotating turbine into this scenario then you start to bring some of this warmer air from the turbine height down towards the cooler ground-level surface. Equally, you will be moving cold air from the surface higher up. This is how you see the warming effect. Although it is getting warmer at the surface, it is not adding heat anywhere; it is just mixing it up.”

The team’s data demonstrated that the impact of the turbines was ‘just one very small effect alongside many other existing effects’ such as nearby forests or changes in altitude.

The study is published in *Environmental Research Letters*. See: <http://bit.ly/1TwgdYZ>

WINDFARM UPDATE

Dumfries & Galloway: E.On has revised plans for a windfarm at Quantans Hill near Carsphairn. The original application for 19 turbines was withdrawn; 12 turbines are now planned.

Highland: The *Press & Journal* reported that RES’ proposed 12 turbine windfarm at Aberarder near Farr, south of Inverness in the Monadhliadh has been turned down. The site is near both the Dunmaglass and Farr windfarms but is not within a designated area. Both Strathnairn and Strathdearn community councils objected to the application, concerned about the proposed windfarm’s visual impact. The Highland Council has now rejected the proposal. Council leader, Margaret Davidson, said that the region had already surpassed the target for renewable energy generation and the cumulative effect of hundreds of turbines circling Loch Ness was threatening tourism, particularly along the Great Glen Way. RES said that it had designed a windfarm that would not be visible from Loch Ness.

- Highland Council has approved the Isle of Canna Community Development Trust’s plans for six turbines on the island. The scheme also involves a 30 kw bank of photovoltaic panels. Electricity will be stored in batteries; existing electricity on the island is provided by diesel generators, which are ‘costly, non-renewable and problematic.’

Scottish Borders: A public inquiry will be held into 2020 Renewables plans for a 14 turbine windfarm at Whitelaw Brae near Tweedsmuir. Scottish Borders Council objected to the scheme, citing concerns about the cumulative visual impact on archaeological sites.

ABERDEEN HYDRO

The *Press & Journal* reported that Aberdeen Community Energy’s hydro power scheme has been given planning permission. The Donside Hydro project is on the site of the former Donside paper mill in Tillydrone and will harness energy from the River Don. Construction will start in May.

OPENCAST COAL

The *BBC News* website reported that opencast mine operator, Hargreaves Services, is to accelerate the closure of six out of its seven sites in Scotland [Feb 16]. The company said that it planned to spend more than £3m on the closures. The sites to close include Broken Cross (South Lanarkshire), Duncanziemere and Netherton (East Ayrshire), Glenmuckloch (Dumfries & Galloway) and St Ninians (Fife). The only site unaffected is House of Water in Ayrshire. Coal extraction at Muir Dean in Fife has already halted as a result of an ‘ongoing lack of demand.’

Hargreaves said in a statement: “Over the last year, the challenges facing the coal sector in the UK have increased due to continuing coal price weakness and low levels of coal demand arising from weak gas prices and an accelerated programme of UK coal generation plant closures. Given these continuing pressures the board has elected to further accelerate its withdrawal from the thermal coal sector.”

The company said it was shifting its focus into selling its land assets and in reinstating coal mine sites.

FRACKING

The Sunday Herald reported that researchers from the University of Missouri found hormone-disrupting chemicals in surface water near a fracking waste water disposal facility in West Virginia. The concentrations were high enough to damage wildlife and threaten human health.

Companies such as INEOS have plans to frack around Glasgow, Edinburgh, Falkirk and Dunfermline, hydraulically fracturing underground rocks to extract shale gas.

The SNP election manifesto states that fracking would not be allowed 'unless it can be proved beyond any doubt that it will not harm our environment, communities or public health.'

Professor Andrew Watterson, of the University of Stirling, said that the use of hormone-disrupting chemicals in the fracking industry was 'inevitable.' He said: "The public currently has no statutory rights to know which fracking chemicals may be used now and in the future and, despite assurances from industry, government and regulators, we still do not know how exactly fracking fluids and related waste water may be disposed of in either England or Scotland." He said that the Scottish fracking industry would be 'very unwise' to dismiss the evidence from the USA: "They must acknowledge that the problem of effectively dealing with fracking waste water containing endocrine disruptors has not yet been solved."

Professor Stuart Haszeldine, of the University of Edinburgh, thought that the use of hormone-disrupting chemicals in the US was becoming 'potentially problematic.' Spillages from poorly constructed drill sites and from waste water treatment plants had resulted in contamination. He said that how the fracking industry was planning to dispose of its waste water in the UK was very unclear: "There are no specialist water treatment plants in Scotland or England intending to accept fracking waste waters."

Dr Richard Dixon, of Friends of the Earth Scotland, warned that communities living with fracking would have to live with toxic pollution. "The SNP manifesto challenges the industry to prove it has no adverse impact on the environment and health. This study shows that they can't possibly meet that test. This should be a final nail in the fracking coffin for the already sceptical SNP."

Richard Longden, of INEOS, insisted that the US findings had no implications for Scotland. "This study is simply not relevant to the UK where the government has already confirmed there will be a completely different process for the handling and disposing of waste water from fracking operations. To try and link this process to Scotland is wrong and will simply mislead the Scottish public."

Peter Pollard, of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), said that SEPA would have to authorise waste water discharges from fracking operations in Scotland. It would not allow the disposal of the water into the ground. He said: "Before granting authorisation for a discharge into a surface water, SEPA would have to be assured that the discharge would not cause pollution. Any authorisation granted by SEPA would place limits on the quantities of substances that could be discharged."

NUCLEAR POWER

The Herald reported that figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in Scotland the

nuclear power sector was worth more than £660m to Scotland's economy in 2014, accounting for 11.8% of all turnover from low-carbon industries including wind, hydro and solar compared to 7.5% in England.

More than 70% of Scotland's electricity is generated by low carbon sources compared to 39% for the UK as a whole. In Scotland, around two thirds of low-carbon electricity come from renewable sources with the rest from nuclear.



TOURISM & RECREATION

KINCARDINESHIRE GOLF

FM Group's Ury Estate golf development, near Stonehaven, has been approved by Aberdeenshire Council [Mar 16].

The Woodland Trust (WT) Scotland said that the loss of several hectares of ancient woodland, and hundreds of trees, would be one of the largest it had recorded; the habitat was valued for its high ecological diversity and wildlife. Charles Dundas, of WT Scotland, said: "There is sadly perhaps a sense of inevitability about this decision. We can now only hope that the council think long and hard about the proposed compensation for the potential loss of 25.5 hectares of ancient woodland, which as we know is irreplaceable."

"After the furore approving Donald Trump's golf course, Aberdeenshire Council were very clear about the sort of developments that they would approve when they drew up their official development plan, and the scale of this proposal far exceeds what the plan considers acceptable. I just hoped that the councillors wouldn't be dazzled by celebrity into u-turning on their existing planning policy."

An FM Group spokeswoman said: "We are very sensitive to the natural environment and aim to do everything we can to improve the natural surroundings and make them more accessible for everyone to enjoy. Ury is fortunate to contain a huge amount of biodiversity and the aim is to protect and enhance that. Around 17 hectares is designated as ancient woodland but much of this doesn't comprise of trees, but rather poor quality grassland, bracken and rushes. Areas of the Ury and Cowie are being overwhelmed by sycamores which are threatening the biodiversity and our development will allow better management of this woodland, enhancing it and promoting greater biodiversity."

FM Group said 600 trees within what is designated as ancient woodland would be removed, 1,000 new trees had already been planted on the estate, and about 5,000 more were proposed around the golf course.

The plans had already been approved by the Kincardine & Mearns area committee.

SKYE FOOTPATHS

The first phase has been completed of the restoration of the footpath from Sligachan to Loch Coruisk on Skye. The John Muir Trust hopes that phase two will begin later this year, which will involve restoring a further 450 metres of path below Druim Hain towards Sligachan.

WHITLEE WINDFARM

Whitelee Wind Farm Visitor Centre on Eaglesham Moor has welcomed 500,000 visitors of 15 nationalities in the seven years since it opened. More than 65 miles of trails are used by walkers, runners, cyclists and horse riders. Whitelee is the UK's largest onshore windfarm with 215 turbines generating up to 539 MW megawatts of electricity.



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

BUTTERFLY CONSERVATION

Butterfly Conservation Scotland is running a three year Urban Butterfly project, running identification workshops across central Scotland. The project will build on the Biodiversity in Glasgow project that ran in 2007-8 and recorded butterflies in green spaces across the city. It aims to discover how butterflies use urban green spaces and work with land managers to improve them for the species. The project will concentrate on Glasgow, Fife, Stirling and Falkirk this year, with Edinburgh in 2017.

CROFTING COMMISSION

The Scottish Government announced a review on the future of the Crofting Commission, ahead of elections of commissioners next year. There are six constituencies, each with an elected representative, with a further three members nominated by Scottish ministers. The *West Highland Free Press* reported that there have been calls for the Western Isles to have two elected members, as there is a high concentration of crofts on Lewis and Harris. This would mean combining other areas to allow this concession. Crofting lawyer, Brian Inkster, said that there is no need to be confined to six constituencies; the government could amend both constituency boundaries and the number of elected members. The consultation paper should offer both options.

- Crofters have called for an inquiry to be launched into the Crofting Commission and its operations after it dismissed 13 crofters from two grazings committees in Mangersta and Upper Coll on Lewis. Both disputes are over the distribution of money.

SSPO

Ann MacColl has been appointed chairwoman of the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO), taking over from Professor Phil Thomas.

SRUC

Professor Wayne Powell has been appointed as new principal and chief executive of Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) with effect from 1 July.

Janet Swadling, who has been acting chief executive and principal since 2013, will act as his deputy.

TREES FOR LIFE

Trees for Life has launched the Back to Our Roots appeal for its 25th anniversary. It aims to expand Scotland's Caledonian Forest from Glen Affric towards the west coast.

The appeal seeks to raise £18,000 for a new phase of tree planting in partnership with Forest Enterprise Scotland. It will extend the native woodland beyond its current stronghold towards Scotland's west coast, creating a continuous corridor of forest across this part of the Highlands.

Trees for Life's ambition is to establish one million more trees by planting and natural regeneration across the Highlands by 2018.