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CONSERVATION

ST KILDA SEABIRDS

The *Sunday Herald* reported that the latest monitoring by the National Trust For Scotland (NTS) of seabirds on St Kilda has shown that numbers have dropped by 68% (razorbills); 56% (fulmars) and 53% (guillemots) between 1999 and 2015. Regular counts from the land and sea show that by 2015 there were only 276 nests left used by kittiwakes – a fall of 89% since 1999, with interim counts suggesting a continuous decline.

There were only 718 razorbills counted last year. Over the same period, fulmar nests have declined from 62,000 to 27,000, and guillemots from 17,438 to 8,206.

The latest counts on one of the St Kilda islands, Boreray, and two adjoining sea stacs, have confirmed that populations of kittiwakes, fulmars, razorbills and guillemots have all fallen by 60% or more since 2000.

Susan Bain, of NTS, said that a dearth of food triggered by climate change is probably the main cause of the collapse. Sandeels, on which some seabirds depend for food, are thought to be moving deeper or further north as the ocean warms, making it harder for birds to find them. She said that there could be a range of other factors involved, including over-fishing, discarded fishing gear, changes in fishing practice, plastic pollution and predation by other seabirds such as great skuas.

Laura Bambini, of RSPB Scotland, said that seabirds were a key indicator of the health of the seas: “St Kilda is one of the world’s most important wildlife sites. It is devastating to witness the declines of breeding seabirds there, and around Scotland. The birds are struggling to breed, chicks are starving and, if this continues, the sea cliffs of Scotland could soon fall silent.”

She said that the changing global climate was ‘driving massive shifts in marine ecology.’ She said: “Seabird island restoration projects will help more immediately to build resilience, and Scotland’s fledgling network of marine protected areas, if developed further and managed well, will be a critical basis for future progress. The urgency lies in making these initiatives work.”

Dr Andrew Douse, of SNH, agreed that seabird populations were declining and that climate change was probably a cause. He said: “The reasons are likely to be complex and sometimes related to local conditions at a particular site. However, it is true that a major factor in many seabird declines, especially those that primarily feed on sandeels, is due to a decrease in sandeel availability to breeding birds at critical times during the breeding season. Heavy fishing pressure on sandeel stocks may also act in conjunction with warming seas to depress sandeel availability. Long-term monitoring of sites like St Kilda and other sites is the key to aiding our understanding of what’s happening [with climatic change].”

LITTLE GULLS

Little gulls are breeding in Scotland for the first time. A pair has nested at the Loch of Strathbeg in Aberdeenshire. An RSPB Scotland drone, used to monitor vegetation, picked up images of the nest containing a single egg.

RED SQUIRRELS

NTS announced that Drum Castle near Aberdeen has been confirmed a ‘red-only’ zone for squirrels. NTS monitored squirrels as part of the Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels annual monitoring programme. Steve Willis, of Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels, said: “This is great news for Drum and is even more significant as it appears to signal a return of reds in this area. From surveys in the Aberdeenshire area, it looks like greys are confined to woods in and immediately around the city and we don’t have any evidence that they are spreading into new areas, so far.”

See: www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk; <http://bit.ly/1VkJmFq>

WILDCATS

NTS has installed more than 30 trail cameras on its properties from Perthshire northwards, as part of the ‘Highland Tiger’ project to spot Scottish wildcats [May 16]. Images from Inverewe Gardens in Wester Ross and Leith Hall in Aberdeenshire are thought to show good examples of wildcat hybrids.

BUTTERFLIES

The latest Scottish Biodiversity Indicator reported on trends for 20 of the 34 regularly occurring butterfly species in Scotland at 436 sample locations. The majority of Scottish butterflies can be conveniently classed as ‘specialists’ or ‘generalists.’ Scotland’s specialist butterflies have declined by 67% since 1979. Three species declined significantly over the past ten years: small pearl bordered fritillary, large heath and grayling. Generalists such as the small skipper and Essex skipper are benefitting from climate change and have expanded their range into southern Scotland. Three generalist butterflies show climate-driven, significant long-term population increases – peacock, speckled wood and orange-tip. Regular migrant butterflies, including the red admiral, are also growing in number. More research is needed to be done to understand the reasons, not only for the decline in certain species, but also the increase in others. Butterflies are monitored through the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme.

CAIRNGORMS CONSULTATION

Big Park Big Questions is a consultation on the next Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan for 2017-22. The consultation will focus on nine key issues; landscape scale conservation – looking at woodland expansion and habitat enhancement; deer and moorland management – the balance of grouse moor and deer management with wider habitat and species diversity; flood management and reduction of flooding impacts; visitor infrastructure; using the infrastructure in the park to encourage people to be active and healthy; learning & inclusion – ensuring that every child in Scotland gets to visit the Cairngorms National Park; community capacity; housing and provision of more affordable homes balanced against the need to protect what is special about the Park; economic development, looking at infrastructure investment, education, tourism, forestry and renewable energy opportunities.

The consultation closes on 30 September. See: <http://bit.ly/28ZFDAz>



URBAN MEADOWS

A team led by Professor Graham Stone, of Edinburgh University, studied flowers from annual and perennial species typically grown in wildflower meadows, and associated weeds. Sixty large meadows were planted over the UK, including some in Edinburgh; they were planted and maintained by city parks teams and local schools.

It was found that meadows made up of perennial plants produce up to 20 times as much nectar and six times as much pollen than those made up of annual species. Perennial meadows contain more pollen and nectar and also flower earlier in the year. A significant contribution to nectar and pollen early in the year comes from weeds such as dandelions and buttercups.



FARMING

ORGANIC LAND

Organic Farming in Scotland, 2015 Statistics has been published which shows that the amount of agricultural land used for organic farming in Scotland has fallen by 7% to 126,000 hectares. This is 2.3% of agricultural land given over to organic farming and is the seventh consecutive fall in Scotland.

Land for organic potatoes and vegetables fell by 13%, but there were increases in the number of organic cattle, pigs and poultry.

The amount of organic land used in Scotland for grassland and rough grazing was down by 7% and cereals were down 9%. Pasture made up 93% of organic land. The number of organic cattle went up by 10%, the number of pigs almost trebled and poultry was up by 30%. However, there was a 26% fall in the number of sheep. There was also a decrease in the number of licensed producers and processors, down from 576 in 2014 to 539 in 2015.

See: www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00501363.pdf

The Scottish Government will drive forward growth in the organics sector with a £50,000 development fund. The fund will help deliver *Organic Ambitions*, the industry's Action Plan for 2016-20, with an initial focus on developing innovative approaches to strengthening the Scottish organic supply chain.

CROFTING

The Herald reported that there are growing calls for crofting law to be amended to resolve the dispute between the Crofting Commission and local crofters on Lewis [May 16]. The commission sacked grazings committees in Mangersta and Upper Coll over their failure to distribute revenues to shareholders, investing it in local funds instead. Other crofting communities have expressed their concern over the commission's actions, and many feel that absentee crofters who are shareholders should not benefit.

Members of the Crofting Commission met members of the Western Isles Council's Crofting Joint Consultative Committee to discuss the situation. Uisdean Robertson, the committee chairman, said that the meeting had concluded certain key points: "Common grazings committees are allowed to retain appropriate funds in common grazings accounts to carry out planned works on common grazings. This is an important clarification from the commission and will help reassure common grazings committees."

He said that all present from the council and the commission had agreed 'that legislative change is urgently required' as well as greater transparency. The council would work with partners 'to press for an early review of the legislation.'

William Swann, one of three commission members appointed by the Scottish Government, stood down without explanation. He was chair of the Audit and Finance Committee. Catriona Maclean, of the Crofting Commission, said that the commission had six crofters directly elected by the crofting community, and would remain quorate.

In an open letter to over 15,388 crofters, Ms Maclean said: "I think it is important to say that the Commission is not on a campaign to review the functioning of every grazings committee. Be assured, we do understand that most of the nearly 500 grazings committees across the crofting counties are working well, and will continue to do so, helping to safeguard this important community asset. This situation has identified the passion and value that crofters, and those who represent them, put on common grazing land. The Commission shares that passion and value and it is good to see its management and potential being discussed openly. It is also important to emphasise that the Commission has never said 'every grazings committee must carry out a full audit of their accounts' or that 'without question all grazings committee must distribute every penny of money to all shareholders and that no money can be retained'. This view has been advanced by others, not the Commission."

She said that the Commission is the regulator of crofting and had to represent the interest of all crofters, the majority of whom shared in common grazings and 'when they express concerns we have a duty to investigate. In most cases these matters are resolved by mutual agreement.'

The *BBC News* website reported that crofters in Mangersta may now appoint a new grazings committee 'of their choice.' The Crofting Commission said that the grazings constable, appointed by the commission, had concluded his investigation and stepped down.

In a letter to shareholders at Mangersta, the Commission said that it 'regrets the conflicting advice' given to the previous committee. Following an evaluation of the case, the Commission said it was drafting revised guidance and had reviewed its processes.

ASSYNT CROFTS

The Assynt Foundation said that it hopes to establish new crofts, of varying size, on the 44,000 acres of land it owns in the north west Highlands. A working group has been set up to explore possible locations for crofts, which include Tileathdoire, Drumrunie, Ledbeg, Cnocnaneach and Glencanisp.

The Assynt Foundation said: "These crofts will be established and regulated according to crofting law. They will be life-long, heritable tenancies, with an annual rent payable to Assynt Foundation, with no automatic right-to-buy or assign."

AMERICAN FOULBROOD

Science & Advice for Scottish Agriculture found American Foulbrood in two apiaries in the St Cyrus area of south Aberdeenshire. The apiaries have been destroyed and movement of bees and related equipment into or out of the affected area has been prohibited. The disease kills honey bee larvae and there is no permitted treatment for it in the UK.

IPM

The Scottish Farming Leader reported that the Scottish Government has launched an Integrated Pest Management Plan (IPM) to maximise the efficiency of production whilst minimising negative effects on the environment. The plan guides farmers through the IPM process which involves the use of crop rotations, cultivation

techniques, resistant varieties, tailored use of plant protection products and the enhancement of wildlife habitats.

See: <http://bit.ly/pestmanagementplan>

ARGYLL GOOSE MANAGEMENT

Increasing numbers of resident greylag and Canada geese on Mull and in the Oban area of Argyll have led to a Local Goose Management Group being set up through the local NFU Scotland branches. Awareness of the legal rights and regulations relating to shooting geese during the open season is being promoted, and encouragement given to apply for out of season licences where required. Farmers and land managers are being encouraged to record goose populations throughout the year and to increase shooting activity.



WOODLANDS

TREE PLANTING TARGETS

The Herald reported that Forestry Commission figures revealed that 4,600 hectares of woodland was planted in Scotland in 2015/16, short of a Scottish Government target of 10,000 hectares per year, and the lowest number planted for six years [Feb 16].

Charles Dundas, of Woodland Trust (WT) Scotland, said: "These are woeful figures. We need to get on track to meet these targets for the sake of every person in the country. Trees help fight the causes and impacts of climate change – both removing CO₂ and contributing to flood defences. They improve air quality, water quality and biodiversity, and are an economic asset. Their impact touches the life of everyone in Scotland. This rate of planting is not serving the people of Scotland well. It's not just about wildlife and scenery. It's about the wellbeing of the entire nation. Problems and delays with the Forestry grants process over the last year, and the change over from one system to another, was always going to impact on the planting rates, but this number of trees in the ground is disastrous for Scotland."

WT Scotland called on Fergus Ewing, the new environment secretary, to deliver on a manifesto commitment to meet the target and 'hasten the pace' of tree planting across the country.

However, the new Forestry Commission statistics showed that almost 85% of new planting across the UK in the last financial year came in Scotland.

DEER & WOODLANDS

The board of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has given a final opportunity to the Assynt Peninsula sub group in Sutherland to show that it can manage deer numbers on nationally and internationally protected woodlands without the need for legal intervention.

The group was given until spring 2017 to demonstrate that it can manage the deer population on its land in an effective and cooperative way. The group consists of the 12 landowners on the site. However, after many unsuccessful attempts over several years to get the three main estate holders to agree a voluntary approach to managing the deer in a way that would protect the site, SNH had considered asking Scottish ministers to impose formal regulation, for the first time, under Section Eight of the Deer (Scotland) Act. This would require landowners to shoot more deer, failing that they would be fined and SNH would organise a cull.

SNH said that the Ardvair Woodlands Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on the Assynt peninsula is being seriously damaged by high numbers of grazing red deer. The internationally important woodlands lie about six miles northeast of Lochinver, between Drumbeig and Unapol.

Although mainly birch-dominated, oak is also present and the site is also designated as part of the Ardvar and Loch a' Mhuilinn Special Area of Conservation. These sites form the most northern remnants of native oak woodland in the British Isles and are relics of the northwestern forests which are now very restricted this far north.

SNH said: "Over several years now our attempts to get the key landowners to agree a plan to manage the deer voluntarily have been unsuccessful ... time is now against us. It is in the public interest to ensure that we protect the woodlands and allow them to regenerate for future generations, but their designations mean we are also required to look after them under national and European legislation."

SNH had asked landowners to sign a voluntary agreement under Section Seven of the Act. However some have refused in principle, because it can give SNH emergency powers if serious damage is being done to public interest or designated sites. A short period for all parties to develop another proposal was then agreed.

Ray MacKay, of the Assynt Crofters Trust, said it had refused to sign a Section Seven agreement. "But we are more than willing to fulfil SNH's cull targets and allow them access to monitor them. We have agreed a fencing deal with SNH. So we are not against the content of the Section Seven agreement they proposed, it is the principle of the compulsion clause if things go wrong."

Douglas McAdam, of Scottish Land & Estates, said: "The landscapes, woodlands and biodiversity are highly valued by the local estates which have looked after them for decades – well before the requirements of EU legislation. The specific situation has been complicated by adjacent neighbours, a combination of private, NGO and community owned estates, having different management objectives and ethos. Either way this situation needs brought to a conclusion, ideally through good local collaborative management."

Ian Ross, of SNH, said: "After careful consideration of the group's proposal, and encouraged by growing engagement recently, our board has decided to allow the group until spring 2017 to manage the deer voluntarily and achieve the results urgently needed to help these special woodlands regenerate. We strongly believe that the collaborative approach achieves the best results. However, if it looks unlikely that this is going to secure the woodlands' future, we're prepared to re-engage quickly in formal regulation."



FISHFARMING & FISHERIES

SEA-LICE

Andrew Graham-Stewart, of Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland (S&TCS), said that Norway, Canada, Ireland and the USA were all ahead of Scotland when it came to protecting wild fish from the impacts of salmon aquaculture [May 16]. He said: "The contrast between the strict statutory controls elsewhere and the paucity of regulation in Scotland is extreme. When it comes to the most serious threat to wild salmonids, sea-lice produced by the billion on salmon farms, Scotland essentially relies on what are little more than gentleman's agreements and unenforceable codes of good practice with the industry which have no status in law. In contrast, the Faroes have almost zero tolerance of any build-up of sea-lice and the Norwegians accept no more than 0.5 lice *per* farmed fish. Yet the Scottish regime now allows up to an astonishing eight lice *per* farmed fish before any serious remedial action must be considered."

He said that it was very noticeable amongst the NGOs present at the recent North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation annual meeting in Germany that, although none of them thought their respective governments were doing enough to protect salmon from aquaculture, they were all astonished at just how lax Scotland was 'and how the Scottish officials appear deluded that their latest plans for supposedly tougher regulation will provide any meaningful protection to wild salmon and sea trout.'

Hughie Campbell Adamson, of S&TCS, said: "It is a sad state of affairs when Scotland has considerably weaker regulation than even the Faroes. Anyone who has seen immature salmon and sea trout in the west Highlands & Islands being eaten alive by these sea-lice will understand that the government's comprehensive failure to introduce proper protection for our wild fish is Scotland's shame."

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said: "Scotland has a robust legislative and regulatory framework in place which continues to provide the right balance between growing aquaculture and protecting the environment. The Scottish Government takes considerable steps to protect wild salmon, including a presumption against development of marine finfish farm developments on the north and east coasts which covers approximately 80% of Scotland's wild caught salmon. There are also a number of Special Areas of Conservation where wild salmon are afforded additional protection."

She said that the government had worked co-operatively with the fishfarming industry to agree a strengthened sea-lice management policy for the prevention, reduction and control of sea-lice on farms which took effect in May. This includes agreed reporting levels where increased monitoring and intervention are required, recognising the benefits to the sector and in turn to the wider environment, including wild fish.

RAASAY RANGES

The *BBC News* website reported that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has been examining the potential of enlarging the British Underwater Test & Evaluation Centre Ranges in the Inner Sound between the Isle of Raasay and Applecross in Wester Ross. This would involve prohibiting fishing in an additional 25 km² [Dec 15]. The MoD said: "The MoD economic impact assessment concluded that the impact on local fishing vessels will be limited. In addition, the MoD and industry are working very closely with the local fishing community to identify further mitigation measures. The proposed changes must be implemented to sustain jobs in the medium term and it is important to remember that the Raasay Ranges also bring considerable economic benefits to Scotland."

However, prawn fishermen told the economic impact study commissioned by the MoD that the total annual cost to their industry could be up to £600,000, and up to six langoustine boats could be lost. The report concluded the figure was likely to be closer to £480,000.



MARINE

SEALS & TURBINES

The *BBC News* website reported that a report commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), *Assessing Collision Risk Between Tidal Turbines And Marine Wildlife*, detailed the potential for seals coming into contact with tidal turbines in the Pentland Firth. The study examined the movements of tagged seals in the Pentland Firth

between mainland Scotland and the Orkney Islands; the research was based on a hypothetical array of up to 86 tidal turbines.

The research suggested that collisions could happen, but were not likely to be fatal to grey seals; smaller common seals might be 'less robust.' Seals should be able to detect turbines 'both visually and acoustically and are also likely to be able to modify their behaviour to avoid collisions.' This avoidance behaviour required additional research. See: www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1891502.pdf

CORKSCREW INJURIES

A study by the Sea Mammal Research Unit and the Scottish Marine Animals Strandings Scheme (SMASS) into the 'corkscrew' injuries, spiral lacerations, sustained by seals has shown that cannibalism is more extensive than previously thought [Feb 15]. The injuries had previously been attributed to ship propellers or shark predation.

The killing is thought to be done to eliminate potential rivals, and to eat as food. An adult mail seal was observed catching, killing and eating five weaned grey seal pups over one week on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth. A further nine carcasses found in the same area exhibited similar injuries. Postmortem examination of the lesions in 12 of the 14 carcasses were indistinguishable from carcasses previously attributed to propeller interaction.

Dr Andrew Brownlow, of SMASS, said: "In Scotland the need to identify a cause of these injuries is high, given the unexpected decline of several harbour seal populations. The population of harbour seals in the Tay and Eden Special Area of Conservation has declined by more than 90% over the past 15 years."

WEST COAST SHARK TRACKING

SNH and Marine Scotland Science (MSS) are using tracking devices to better understand how common skate and spurdog use the Loch Sunart to the Sound of Jura Marine Protected Area (MPA), designated to help protect the common skate. Tags have been fitted to 40 skate caught in the area, the largest of which weighed 98kgs. The area is also a hotspot for spurdog, spiny dogfish, a small shark which grows up to 1.5 metres long. Eight spurdog have been tagged so far and more tagging is planned for the summer. The tagged fish were photographed for future identification and a DNA sample was taken for analysis, before being released. Acoustic tags communicate with receivers positioned in the Sound of Mull, the Firth of Lorn, Loch Linnhe, the Lynn of Lorn and Loch Etive, which record each time an individual fish passes within range.

Both species were once common in Scottish waters but have suffered large declines in population numbers and, now considered to be vulnerable, are included on Scotland's list of Priority Marine Features for conservation action.

Dr James Thorburn, of MSS, said: "Some of the skate are also fitted with Data Storage Tags (DSTs), which record the depth and water temperature every two minutes. DSTs provide more detail about where the fish are spending their time in the MPA, allowing us to recreate their movements."

Spurdog are generally thought to be a migratory species, travelling over large distances. However, studies have shown that some spurdog remain in Loch Etive throughout the winter. The tagging work will improve understanding about the number of fish that move in and out of the loch, or remain there year round. MSS has also tagged salmon smolts leaving the Rivers Lochy and Awe that will be detected by the same receivers. The Scottish Association for Marine Science is listening for harbour porpoise clicks with equipment attached to some of the receiver moorings.

Local creel fishermen are helping to maintain the moorings and to collect the data from the receivers. Sea anglers have shared their skate and spurdog data. There is a reward for each of the DSTs returned.

See: www.snh.gov.uk/skate-spurdog-tracking

MINCH PORPOISES

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that Pete Middleton, of the Western Isles Council, recommended that the comhairle adopt a formal approach that was 'fundamentally opposed' to the designation of a Special Area of Conservation to protect the harbour porpoise in the Minch [May 16]. The consultation has now closed, but the council was given an extension in order for the matter to be considered at a scheduled meeting of the sustainable development committee.

Mr Middleton's report said: "Given the level and extent of scientific information provided and the timescale within which to assess this information, the comhairle cannot agree that the scientific evidence prevented supports and justifies the case for designation ... the fishing sector has reported that small-meshed drift nets have traditionally been used in the Outer Hebrides to target herring with no reported interaction with porpoises.

"In addition, use of bottom set nets with a mesh size larger than 250 mm is permitted on the west coast of Scotland and are used as part of a valuable fishery targeting crawfish. Again, there is no reported interaction with porpoises with bottom set nets. These types of small scale static gear fishing activity should be allowed to continue in the designated area. This type of designation is now viewed with scepticism and hostility by both the comhairle and the local community. No designation should be imposed on the community without its express involvement and consent. Continual imposition of unwanted designations is bringing the system into disrepute."

SMALL ISLES MPA

The Scottish Government said that further consultation on how the Small Isles MPA should be managed will now start in August [Feb 16]. The order introducing the area was delayed to allow more dialogue concerning management, following representations from Mallaig & North West Fishermen's Association.

The Small Isles MPA covers an area of more than 308 square miles, including the Sound of Canna. Fragile habitats in the area include the UK's only colony of rare fan mussels.

BEACH AWARDS

Keep Scotland Beautiful has awarded the newly launched Scotland's Beach Award to 60 beaches throughout Scotland. It rewards clean, well managed and sustainable beaches, which demonstrate excellent beach management and environmental best practice ensuring the maintenance of high standards. See: <http://bit.ly/29dIQfx>

PARLIAMENT & POLITICS

REFERENDUM

A Scottish Environment LINK statement said that, given that environmental legislation falls primarily within the competence of the EU, with 28 different member states working together on common policies, the referendum result will have critical implications for Scotland's environment.

Joyce McMillan, president of LINK, said: "This is a hugely significant vote. The UK's

journey towards a withdrawal from the EU will be a lengthy process, and it is critical that Scotland's Government and elected members of the Scottish Parliament work together to ensure that the standards of environmental protection enshrined in European law are upheld and enhanced. The UK electorate's decision to vote in favour of leaving the EU does not change the fact that Scotland and the UK are facing tremendous challenges in terms of environmental degradation. Through the UK's EU membership, Scotland has benefited from a number of critical pieces of EU environmental legislation such as EU Nature Laws, air and water quality.

"Now, the direction of travel for Scotland needs to be one that builds on those achievements, rather than one that seeks to weaken or undo the progress which our EU membership has helped us to secure. This is equally true for UN agreements to which the UK and Scotland have committed themselves via the EU, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change. It is important that we continue to respect the EU laws to which we remain bound. Any failure to do so could result in court action and will damage existing relationships with EU partners. Environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss know no boundaries. This is why redefining our relationship with the EU and its member countries will be particularly important in the coming months. We look to our leaders here and in the UK to open discussions with all relevant stakeholders now, to consider the relationships we will need with Europe as a whole, and to ensure delivery of adequate environmental protection.

"A healthy, sustainable environment is the key to our future economy, health and wellbeing and no change in political or constitutional structures alters the need for well-designed and well-enforced legislation to protect and maintain our precious natural environment."

EU Directives and Regulations continue to apply to Scotland and the UK until a withdrawal agreement is negotiated between the EU and the UK. Scottish Environment LINK will be closely monitoring the UK's and Scotland's next steps in the process of EU membership withdrawal to ensure that protection of the environment is upheld and enhanced, at Scottish, UK and international levels. See: <http://bit.ly/291AMiA>

Jonny Hughes, of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) said: "Reassurances over funding for the environment are needed. Scotland currently receives substantial amounts of funding for environmental initiatives from the EU and we are deeply concerned about a potential sharp drop in income from this source. We are calling on both the Scottish and UK governments to provide assurances that the level of funding provided through mechanisms such as the environmental options under the Scottish Rural Development Programme, LEADER, Life Programme, Green Infrastructure Strategic Intervention, North West Europe Programme and the European Volunteering Scheme will not be reduced below existing levels.

"SWT will seek to work with government to ensure the design and implementation of any future domestic environmental funding package to replace the EU package is fit for purpose, and results in better protection, restoration and sustainable management of Scotland's natural environment.

"Another major area of concern following the leave vote is the uncertain future facing the EU environmental directives. The Nature Directives, Water Framework Directive and Marine Strategy Framework Directive are perhaps the most important tools we have for safeguarding

Scotland's natural capital against degradation and loss. If these Directives are repealed or diluted, the health of our freshwater, our wildlife and our seas will be severely compromised.

"The SWT, along with many other environmental organisations, has fought for decades to help bring this body of law into being. It would be a tragedy for our environment if we now began the painful process of dismantling what we have built. We are calling on the Scottish Government to retain all those acts of the Scottish Parliament that have transposed EU environmental directives and to implement them fully, just as if we were a member of the EU.

"Another uncertainty is around what happens after we exit the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) which, despite the illogicality of the failed discards policy, had recently started to make progress in recovering over-fished cod, haddock and other stocks. Post CFP, both the UK and Scottish governments must set fishing quotas based on sound science rather than pressure from powerful fisheries lobby groups.

"If fisheries policy is deregulated there is little doubt that we will see short term plunder followed by long term ecological collapse and the subsequent loss of thousands of jobs in fishing communities.

"Whatever the next decade brings, SWT will continue the fight to protect and restore Scotland's natural environment, in the uplands, the lowlands, in our cities and towns, and in the oceans that surround us. Now is the time for all rural sectors to come together to make the case for continued investment in Scotland's ecosystems."

ENVIRONMENT PRIORITIES

The newly appointed Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, spoke in a parliamentary debate. She outlined the key actions that she will take over the course of the parliament.

She said that she would review wildlife crime prevention; consult on a public register of controlling interests in land in early summer; establish more ambitious climate change targets and establish the Scottish Land Commission by 1 April 2017.

Ms Cunningham said: "Our natural capital is a national asset and, like any other asset, we must ensure that it remains in good condition now and for the future. The biggest threat to our social and economic ambitions comes from climate change. That is why this government has worked to make Scotland a world leader on climate change and we have a record of which we can be proud. We will establish a new and more testing target for 2020 of reducing actual Scottish emissions by at least 50%. On land reform, our new Act seeks to transform our relationship with the land while helping to create a fairer Scotland. We will introduce a mandatory public register of landowners' controlling interests and I can announce today that the consultation will begin in early summer."

LAND REFORM

The first parts of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act have now come into effect. The provisions will end the exemption from business rates for shooting and deerstalking. This means these businesses will be subject to the same arrangements as others in Scotland from April 2017. Local authorities will now have the power to change the use of some types of common good land if they apply for court consent. New powers on the management of deer populations will be created.

Other parts of the Act, including those on agricultural holdings and on landowners engaging with communities, will begin later in the parliamentary session.

Jonny Hughes, of SWT, said: "Given current uncertainties following last week's referendum

result, it is more important than ever that Scotland continues to invest in its natural environment to help secure our future prosperity and wellbeing. SWT has for many years been calling for stronger statutory measures to reduce the unnaturally high numbers of wild deer in Scotland which are preventing the recovery of our rare Caledonian pinewoods and Atlantic oakwoods. We will be watching with interest to see how the new powers created in the Land Reform Act are applied and if deer numbers begin to approach sustainable levels.

“Land managers are among the most important stewards of Scotland’s natural capital, and the way that land is managed determines whether that capital is enhanced or further degraded. It is essential as we develop a new Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement where rights are linked with clearer responsibilities so we secure a balance of public and private benefits from our land.”

• Seven conservation charities wrote a joint open letter to Roseanna Cunningham. It said: “These are uncertain times. Yet, nature conservation and the environment remain a devolved matter – and nature does not respect jurisdictional boundaries. This is especially crucial for Scotland’s biodiversity – where the conservation of species and sites, environmental assessment, and improvements to water quality have all been underpinned by European laws. In addition, European regulation is crucial to the protection and enhancement of our marine environment, and management of fisheries. Notwithstanding the Scottish Government’s position in seeking to remain with the EU in some form, these are uncertain times. Yet, nature conservation and the environment remain a devolved matter – and nature does not respect jurisdictional boundaries.

“In such circumstances, the Scottish Government is able, if it wishes, to indicate a desire – and policy position – to maintain, or even improve, the standards of protection afforded to our outstanding wildlife. This would both be desirable and consistent with the government’s commitment to both the global biodiversity targets agreed in Japan and the Sustainable Development Goals, to which Scotland was an early signatory.

“We hope that you can be explicit that, despite the uncertainties, the Scottish Government does not see ‘Brexit’ as an opportunity to de-regulate and weaken environmental targets or legislation. In particular, we would welcome a public statement that signals commitment to the Nature, Water and Marine Directives in Scotland – whatever the outcome of coming discussions.

“This would be consistent with the Scottish Government’s European aspirations, as well as your earlier statement that the natural environment is one of Scotland most precious assets and how it is managed, controlled, conserved, promoted, supported and developed matters hugely to the government’s ambitions for our country.”

FRACKING

The Scottish Parliament voted in favour of an outright ban on fracking in Scotland as part of an environment debate at Holyrood [Jan 15]. Members of the Scottish National Party [SNP] abstained.

The Herald reported that Richard Longden, of Ineos, said that it was moving its centre of excellence south and that given the current position, geologists and petrochemical engineers from the firm would now be ‘100% deployed in England.’ He said: “Scotland’s economic fortunes could be transformed by fracking. Estimates suggest that the technology is capable of producing more gas than has been found in the North Sea. If you look at the latest UK geological survey, it

makes the North Sea pale in comparison. Ineos still hold licenses in Scotland but there is no activity taking place. Scotland is losing out as the centre of excellence moves south.

“We are of the view that the peer reviewed research shows that provided it is properly managed, fracking is far safer than coal mining ever was. As energy from the North Sea, coal and nuclear declines the Scottish Government will have to look to foreign importers if the lights are to be kept burning. Already, 60% of the UK’s energy needs comes from abroad, as North Sea declines and renewable sources are not yet capable of closing the gap. Scotland is missing out on the opportunities presented by shale gas as tax revenues from oil are plummeting. It is in danger of falling behind the rest of the UK when it comes to the jobs and energy security and investment that can be created by the process.”

Ken Cronin, of United Kingdom Onshore Oil and Gas, said: “The Scottish Government announced a process in January 2015 which included a research phase and then a public consultation phase. This is not due to finish until the summer of 2017. UKOOG and its members have been participating in this process from the beginning and will continue to do so. The process is meant to present the facts to the Scottish people and so we are disappointed today to see that some within the Scottish Parliament are trying to derail it. We are confident as an industry based on over 50 years of experience both onshore and offshore that hydraulic fracturing can be done safely and environmentally sensitively within the regulatory environment in Scotland.

“We have had a well regulated industry in Scotland for many decades. We have drilled over 30 wells in the last 20 years. One of the first hydraulic fractures in the UK took place in Airdrie nearly 50 years ago and fracking also took place inside the Glasgow city boundary in 1989 at Easterhouse. The oil and gas industry has made a huge contribution to the economy of Scotland. Onshore gas and oil will benefit the Scottish economy, not only directly, with jobs created through oil and gas extraction, but also indirectly, as oil and gas is a critical raw material for the chemicals industry at facilities such as Grangemouth.”

• Energy minister, Paul Wheelhouse, said: “The government’s position is we are sceptical about unconventional oil and gas but we are taking an evidence-based approach to the industry. We have commissioned a pipeline of research which is going to be reporting back to the government over the summer. We will look carefully at the scientific evidence and we have said we will take great account of the science and also public opinion in forming a view over time. That’s why [the SNP] didn’t, as other parties have done, back a ban in the parliament the other day.

“It’s a non-binding vote in the parliament and we have maintained that we are going to continue to pursue our approach as we set out in our manifesto, which is to look at the science, listen to public opinion through a consultation and then form our view about the future of unconventional oil and gas in the UK and Scotland. We will be consulting the stakeholders and the public about that evidence, and obviously take the views of those that haven’t had a chance to participate in that exercise to see if they an alternative view.”

Mark Ruskell MSP said: “In [the] debate the minister confirmed that the research programme into underground coal gasification, one of the most controversial forms of unconventional gas extraction, would be complete later this summer. There is no reason for delay once that report is in. We stand ready to help ministers bring about a

permanent ban as we are clear that the evidence to do so has existed all along.”

• A Bank of Scotland research report on oil and gas, including fracking, has been published. Murdo Fraser MSP said: “One thing this helpful report tells us is that a majority of large companies see the opportunity to diversify into shale gas. But, sadly, these opportunities and the jobs that would be created will be located outside Scotland because of the government’s stance on this moratorium on fracking. Why is the First Minister not listening to her government’s own scientists on this matter and why is she holding back the vital oil and gas industry?”

He said that the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, had ignored the findings of a 2014 report commissioned from an expert scientific panel which said the technology existed to allow the safe extraction of shale gas ‘subject to robust regulation being put in place.’

Nicola Sturgeon said: “The moratorium on fracking has been introduced so that we can study carefully all of the different aspects of this before coming to a decision that is guided by and based on evidence, but also takes into account public opinion, the opinion of the public who would have to live in areas affected by technology such as this. That is absolutely the right thing to do. Interestingly, Murdo Fraser didn’t quote the report when it comes to diversification fully because the companies that talked about the opportunities of diversification also talked about the opportunities of diversification into renewables.”

NEONICOTINOIDS

A petition with 18,218 signatures from 38 Degrees members was delivered to the new environment secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, asking her to permanently ban neonicotinoid pesticides [Apr 16].

BEAVERS

A petition has been delivered to the Scottish Government calling for legal protection to be extended to all beavers, including populations living feral on Tayside. Beavers in Scotland are subject to a loophole whereby those introduced through the scientific trial in Knapdale are protected, but animals living in the wild elsewhere are not [Mar 16]. The 38 Degrees petition, containing 35,608 signatures, called on Ms Cunningham to stop pregnant and endangered beavers from being shot in Scotland by protecting them under Scottish law. A decision due to be taken on extending legal safeguards had been postponed until after the Holyrood election in May.

MOUNTAIN HARES

Mark Ruskell MSP and Alison Johnstone MSP lodged a series of parliamentary questions and answers about mountain hare ‘massacres’ on Scottish grouse moor [Mar 16]. These included questioning the government about what it is doing to establish a working group to help plan the future arrangements for sustainable management of mountain hares.

Environment secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, replied: “Under the auspices of Scotland’s Moorland Forum, which represents a range of stakeholders involved in moorland management including the Scottish Government and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), it has been agreed that guidance on the management of mountain hare be produced by a selected sub-group of specialists and representatives from relevant interest groups. The inaugural meeting of this sub-group took place in May. The sub-group will produce and publish interim best practice guidance in the autumn. This interim guidance will be updated after the anticipated publication (in 2017) of the

findings from a study being undertaken by the James Hutton Institute, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and SNH into the most appropriate methods of assessing mountain hare numbers. The outputs of the study will be used to standardise the method of establishing mountain hare density in conjunction with the promotion of more cooperative working between estates, thus facilitating better informed decisions on sustainable hare management at regional scale.”

Parliamentary question also asked the Scottish Government what level of estate compliance SNH has recorded in relation to its 2014 position statement, on large-scale culls of mountain hares to reduce louping-ill, in conjunction with Scottish Land & Estates (SLE) and GWCT. Ms Cunningham replied: “The position statement issued by SNH, the GWCT, and SLE sets out a number of different recommendations relating to the management of mountain hares in Scotland. There are no formal arrangements for monitoring the extent to which the recommendations are being followed.”

A further question asked the Scottish Government when SNH plans to require formal mountain hare cull returns from estates in order to inform future sustainable management practice for this species. Ms Cunningham replied that there are no current plans to require mountain hare bag returns.

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog said that a recent independent review on sustainable moorland management was submitted to SNH’s Scientific Advisory Committee in October 2015. One of the main recommendations made in that review was that the case for widespread and intensive culling of mountain hares in the interests of louping-ill control has not been made. See: www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1765931.pdf

Raptor Persecution UK said that annual cull figures ought to be available from each estate, in accordance with obligations under the EU Habitats Directive. The estates claim that their culls are already ‘done in accordance with best practice’ and are ‘informed and balanced’ so they should have the evidence to back them up.

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog said that the Scottish Government’s lack of critical evaluation of this situation, their willingness to ignore the findings of an independent review, and their unwillingness to take any meaningful steps to prevent the ongoing extensive and indiscriminate slaughter of this so-called protected species at the hands of grouse moor managers is ‘nothing short of disgraceful.’

BAYS OF HARRIS

A ballot is to be held on a potential community buyout of the Bays of Harris Estate [Sep 14]. The state is split into three separate tracts of land in Harris and North Uist, including Berneray. The estate is owned by the Hitchcock family.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Scottish Environment LINK’s Governance Group has responded to the Scottish Government consultation on Developments in Environmental Justice. See: <http://bit.ly/28YDKoR>

CROWN ESTATE

A consultation has been launched, seeking views on interim management arrangements for the devolved control of the Crown Estate in Scotland. The Scottish Government will then seek views and engage stakeholders on how best to devolve and manage these assets for the benefit of all of Scotland in the long term.

Scottish ministers propose to set up a new interim public body using powers provided in the

Scotland Act 2016 to lay a statutory instrument at the Scottish Parliament which would be completed through an Order in Council. This will enable the transfer to be completed by the UK government so Scotland can assume the powers in April 2017.

The consultation will run until 26 August. See: <http://bit.ly/297h82P>



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

EDINBURGH GREEN BELT

The *Herald* and *BBC News* website reported that Murray Estates has been granted planning permission by Edinburgh City Council for 1,320 houses in Redheughs Village, the first phase of the new 600 acre ‘garden district’ [May 16]. The £1 billion project is to the west of Edinburgh, between the business park at the Gyle and Heriot-Watt University. The whole plan is for 6,000 houses, a school, community facilities, a shopping complex, sports facilities and green space.

The application will now have to be submitted to the Scottish Government for consideration, which will decide whether it is called in for ministers to issue a final ruling.

The plans were given approval against the advice of the city’s planning department which recommended rejecting the proposals which breached several key environmental policies set out. The council report stated: “Within the council’s area, there is land with planning support and free of planning constraints for around 30,000 homes. This includes sites in the proposed local development plan but not the application site. This means that the site is not required to meet housing land need ... the proposal contravenes policies on Green Belt and Special Landscape Areas as well as the overarching policies in respect of housing land supply as there is no requirement to release the land for housing.”

Conditions attached to the decision included more detailed analysis on flood prevention, traffic and public transport. The development will also see the creation of a new school, community hub and shopping centre, sports facilities and green space.

• The *Herald* reported that the site is covered with giant hogweed and Japanese knotweed. Allister McKillop, of Currie Community Council, said the problem had been known for at least 20 years, but it had never been properly addressed. Neighbours said they had been trying to get Murray Estates to get rid of the weeds for the past five years; the Gogarburn is now affected and also wildflower habitat on the Union Canal.

Steve Burgess, of Edinburgh City Council, said: “This is a major developer who should be taking responsibility for care of the site while it is undeveloped. Even if the public is not likely to come into direct contact with it, giant hogweed spreads very rapidly and the council should be using its powers to enforce control if necessary. If what the developer has done is not effective that is not satisfactory and I would be looking to the council to enforce action.”

Jestyn Davies, of Murray Estates, said the weeds were an issue on land throughout Edinburgh, central Scotland and the UK. He said: “We regularly liaise with the council and other landowners on this issue, and we have an ongoing programme of spraying being carried out. The issue is not a significant one in term of future development, but we will take further specific action in the run-up to construction activities should it prove to be necessary. These

are problems encountered all over Scotland; they can be treated.” He said that the presence of the weeds was an inconvenience, not a ‘gamechanger.’

NORTH KELVIN MEADOW

Scottish ministers are being urged to hold a full public inquiry into plans to build 90 houses on North Kelvin Meadow and The Children’s Wood in Glasgow. In a letter to *The Herald* [Mar 16]. The publicly owned open space was sold to private developers. Government reporters have been appointed to examine whether Glasgow City Council can go ahead with its plans; supporters claimed that only a public inquiry will call on witnesses and highlight the historical use of the green space.

Emily Cutts, of The Children’s Wood, said: “This planning application goes against both local and national policies, it will destroy a highly valued and vitally important community greenspace and there is a clear conflict of interest within the council in terms of the financial gain.” The Children’s Wood obtained funding to advance plans for the site, and received planning permission in January.

The *Herald* reported that first of two Scottish Government reporters, examining objections to the council’s third instalment of its City Plan, has concluded that the land should not have been sold for housing and said that it cannot be designated for housing. The land had been zoned for housing in the first version of the City Plan, about ten years ago, but later altered. The council had wanted it reverted back to land designated for development.

The reporter said: “The land at Clouston Street is a highly valued open space which is well used and maintained by the local community, and which should continue to be safeguarded for that purpose. Its development for housing would be in conflict with planning policies which seek to protect such areas.”

Councillor George Redmond, of Glasgow City Council, said: “The assessment of the Clouston Street site is disappointing and surprising, particularly in the broader context of the reporters’ call for more housing in Glasgow and the potential for development to deliver further investment in community facilities in this neighbourhood. Despite this, we welcome the reporter’s recognition that the Plan Examination is an independent process that should not have a bearing on the processing of the application currently under review at Clouston Street.”

A second reporter, looking into the specific planning application, confirmed that there would be a public inquiry.

DUMFRIES LEAD POLLUTION

The *Sunday Herald* reported that a study by the UK government’s Coal Authority, completed in 2014, recommended that fencing should be put up to prevent the public from being harmed by hazardous levels of lead and zinc in the Queensberry tailing ponds near Wanlockhead in Dumfries & Galloway. The contaminated ponds are followed along their southern edges by the Southern Upland Way. The landowner, the Duke of Buccleuch, is accused by locals of ‘environmental carelessness.’

The report found high levels of toxic heavy metals such as lead, zinc and cadmium in the river in breach of environmental quality standards. It recommended a series of measures to clean up the ponds. The report stated: “Because of the high percentages of lead and zinc detected in the Queensberry tailings pond sediment, it is recommended that the area should be fenced off to prevent livestock and deter members of the public from entering the site.”

The report also urged further studies into the dangers of contaminated dust being blown into the air in dry weather and inhaled by walkers or residents. The impact of wildlife also needed

to be investigated, it said. So far, no action has been taken by the Buccleuch Estate or the local authority.

Claudia Beamish MSP has written to the estate asking for a fence to be erected. Dave Morris, former director of Ramblers Scotland, said: "The appropriate authorities need to identify who is responsible for erecting this fencing and ensure that it is put in place as soon as possible, along with signage to warn of the pollution danger."

SEPA suggested that it would be the responsibility of the Duke of Buccleuch to erect a fence, along with the local authority, which is responsible for maintaining the Southern Upland Way.

Buccleuch pointed out that dealing with the legacy from old mine workings in the area involved SEPA, local authorities, health bodies and local landowners. An estate spokesman said: "A multi-agency public health risk assessment said the risk to human health was low. The UK Coal Authority report recommendations did not state that Buccleuch should be responsible for fencing off the area in question and no regulatory or enforcement order has been issued. However, Buccleuch takes its environmental responsibilities seriously and is pursuing the pond sediment fencing issue through dialogue with Dumfries & Galloway Council."

BIRD OF PREY DISTURBANCE

The *BBC News* website reported that Police Scotland is investigating the disturbance of bird of prey nests in Moy Forest, near Tomatin south of Inverness. Four buzzard nests and one goshawk nest were found abandoned. The adult birds have disappeared and police said some of the sites appeared to have been deliberately disturbed by illegal activity. Moy Forest is managed by Forestry Enterprise Scotland and the nests were being monitored by its staff.

WILDLIFE CRIME

William Beaton was spotted collecting an arctic tern egg on a beach at Furrowend, Shapinsay and later found to be in possession of eggs, including those of rock doves and great skuas, plus an extending spoon used to collect eggs. He was fined £4,200 at Kirkwall Sheriff Court under Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 legislation.

Gary Aitken, procurator fiscal for wildlife and environment, said: "Scotland is home to a wide range of wild bird species, both rare and common, and all are protected by law. It is an offence to intentionally take the egg of any wild bird as it can have serious implications for their conservation and habitat. We hope this prosecution will serve as a clear message to others who participate in the illegal practice of collecting wild bird eggs that this type of offending will not be tolerated."

GENERAL LICENCE RESTRICTIONS

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog reported that Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) issued a restriction on the use of General Licences on both the Raeshaw and Burnfoot Estates in November 2015 [Apr 16]. Raeshaw Farms Ltd petitioned the Courts to seek a Judicial Review of the decision. The Court has yet to make a decision as to whether or not a Judicial Review will proceed. As an interim measure during the petitions process the Judge suspended the restriction up until 10 June. The use of General Licences on this land is once more prohibited.

In response to an application from Raeshaw Farms Ltd, SNH has granted the estate an individual licence to carry out some activities otherwise permitted under General Licence, subject to specific conditions and controls, which will allow the business to continue to operate.

HEN HARRIER

The RSPB's Hen Harrier team has announced the 'disappearance' of another satellite-tagged hen harrier, a two-year old female called Chance. The last signal came from a grouse moor in South Lanarkshire at the end of May. The RSPB's Investigations team conducted a search for the body/tag but nothing was found.

PEREGRINE EGGS

The *BBC News* website reported that eggs stolen from a peregrine falcon's nest in the Jedburgh area of the Scottish Borders are believed by the police to have been taken to be sold on the black market. The incident happened some time between the end of April and the start of May, but the police are only now appealing for public help.

PROSECUTION

Joseph Stewart was fined £750 at Perth Sheriff Court for stealing moss. He filled 40 bin bags, containing 13 kinds of moss and one liverwort, from woodland on Dupplin Estate on Methven Moss, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It was estimated that 1% of the SSSI was damaged or disturbed and that it would take five to ten years for the site to recover from the damage caused by the removal of the moss. Removal of the whole plant is equivalent to uprooting because there would be no regrowth. The moss was intended to be used for Christmas wreaths. Mr Stewart is thought to be the first person in the UK to be convicted of the offence of stealing moss protected by the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981.

AUCHENCORTH MOSS

The *Sunday Herald* reported that Westland Horticulture has applied for permission to extract peat from Auchencorth Moss on the Penicuik Estate in Midlothian. Westland Horticulture wants to extract 100,000 cubic metres of peat every year until 2042 from 240 hectares of Auchencorth Moss. The peat would be for use in gardens. Permission was originally given in 1986, and the company is now seeking to renew that under a 'review of minerals permission' process. The process only allows for planning conditions to be updated, and doesn't permit the original consent to be withdrawn. It also involves paying applicants compensation if additional conditions are imposed.

The Scottish Government's planning policy says that peatlands should be protected, and two other recent applications have been rejected. The policy of Midlothian Council, which covers Penicuik Estate, suggests that peat extraction should not be permitted. Peat is a vital store of carbon, and is meant to be protected to help prevent climate pollution.

The peat extraction is planned to take place in a local wildlife area, and next to an SSSI protected under conservation law. Auchencorth Moss is monitored by scientists as an 'atmospheric observatory.'

Kate Bellew, of RSPB Scotland, said: "This is a damaging proposal that would be completely contrary to local and national planning policy. Although the site has suffered some damage from historic peat extraction for horticulture, the importance of peatlands for wildlife and carbon storage is now well known and alternatives to peat are also widely available for gardeners. Legislation covering historic mineral permissions seems shockingly outdated and inconsistent. There is an urgent need for Scottish legislation to be reviewed to stop the destruction happening on sites such as Auchencorth."

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) pointed out that lowland raised bogs were one of the most rare

and threatened wildlife habitats in Scotland. Susan Davis, of SWT, said: "Auchencorth Moss would be much more valuable to society if protected, providing water filtration, wildlife habitat and carbon storage. Peat free composts are available so there is absolutely no need for this archaic practice to continue."

SNH said that measures proposed to protect the neighbouring SSSI are 'inadequate' and opposes the application.

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said that it would be inappropriate to comment on a live application. She said: "Scottish Government planning policy is clear that the review of permissions for mineral developments every 15 years should be used to apply up-to-date operating and environmental standards."

GARDEN VISITORS

RSPB Scotland reported that 19% of people see hedgehogs in their gardens at least once a month in Scotland, 14% fewer than in 2015. The number of people who have never seen a hedgehog in their garden was 24%, up 8% since 2015.

For the first time in the Big Garden Birdwatch, participants were asked to record foxes and stoats visiting their garden. The results revealed that in Scotland foxes were the second most popular visitor with 33% of people catching one in their garden at least once a month this year. Stoats are an elusive species with only 5% spotting one on a monthly basis. Grey squirrels remained the most common garden visitor for the third year running in Scotland. 52% of participants spotted one at least once a month. 22% of participants reported seeing a red squirrel once a month in their garden.

GREENHOUSE GASES

New statistics show that Scotland's 2014 emission levels were 45.8% lower than in 1990. The Scottish Government had set a target to reduce emissions by at least 42% by 2020, and 80% by 2050. Scotland met its annual climate change targets for the first time since 2010. Climate Change Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, confirmed that the government would now set a 'new and more testing 2020 target.'

WILDFIRE

A large wildfire occurred near Kirkcowan in Dumfries & Galloway, destroying grass and Forestry Commission Scotland woodland.

FLOODING

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and NFU Scotland have agreed a technique to reduce erosion of land on river banks using a mix of trees, stone, and willow planting to protect and stabilise the banks. Not only is this approach proven to protect land from river erosion in a cost effective manner, it also provides environmental benefits by reducing the amount of sediment entering rivers as a result of that erosion.

SEPA and NFU Scotland are working together to promote the use of these bank protection techniques to land managers by providing guidance and expertise, and supporting a number of demonstration sites around the country to demonstrate the effectiveness of the technique. SEPA is authorising this type of bank protection work through the registration process, but at no cost to the applicant.

SEPA will also be working together with NFU Scotland to identify very large gravel deposits and assess whether these have significantly contributed to flooding of agricultural and non-agricultural land and property.

See: <http://bit.ly/1tyn38r>

ABERDEEN BYPASS

SEPA investigated multiple reports of significant silt pollution in watercourses surrounding the Aberdeen Western Periphery Route, following heavy downpours of rain. The pollution appears to have resulted from runoff water from the construction site being flushed into smaller watercourses, including tributaries of the Rivers Dee and Don.

Aberdeen Roads Ltd voluntarily halted construction work for a week, given the potential scale of the pollution which included protected spawning grounds for salmon and freshwater pearl mussels.

CONONISH GOLD

Scotgold Resources said that the bulk processing trial on the stockpile next to the Cononish mine near Tyndrum has been successful [Dec 15]. Scotgold hopes to have produced 100 ounces (oz) of gold by the end of the six-month trial. The trial involves Scotgold processing about 2,400 tonnes from a stockpile believed to contain an estimated 7,000 tonnes at a grade of 7.9 grammes *per tonne* of gold, and 39 grammes *per tonne* of silver.

The trial is expected to yield a total of 500 oz, only 100 oz will be 'smeltable' as Scottish gold. This is because the balance will be locked in a concentrate which may require to be processed off site with other gold.

CYGNETS

Seven cygnets, the first to have been seen in Tarbert harbour in Argyll for several years, have died. A SEPA spokesman said that reports had been received of pollution entering the harbour from a sewage outflow. RSPB Scotland said that an autopsy would be undertaken to establish the cause of death; it was possible that a sewage leak may have caused an algal bloom.

DUMFRIES SEAGULLS

The Urban Gull Taskforce in Dumfries reported that 2,662 eggs were removed, 630 nesting pairs recorded, 127 live chicks removed and 53 complaints received in 2015. A free nest and egg removal service began in 2009. This year, a limited trial of gull repellent gel will be undertaken, and spikes fixed in some popular nesting locations to test effectiveness of the different methods.

A task force report concluded: "Although impossible to prove, it would seem highly likely that without the measures deployed by the council, the breeding population of gulls in Dumfries would be considerably higher than the current population. It is critical that the details of the work continue to be recorded and analysed, in order to pick apart the contribution of various procedures that have taken place. This will enable Dumfries & Galloway Council to direct their efforts towards those procedures most likely to achieve success in the long term. Over time, it is hoped that this work will also benefit other councils when trying to decide how best to mitigate urban nesting gull problems."

Figures show that the number of gulls in the town centre has declined significantly over the years although they have risen on the edge of town. There has been a decrease in nesting seagull numbers since 2000. The number of complaints from the public has fallen sharply over the time the egg and nest removal scheme has been in operation. However, the council said it would not underestimate the scale of the problem. Councillors asked the public not to feed gulls, or drop litter which provides a food supply.

**ENERGY****NORWEGIAN SUPERGRID**

Ofgem has approved the 1.4 GW 400 mile subsea power cable linking Boddam in Aberdeenshire and Eidfjord in Norway. An electricity interconnector licence has been granted to NorthConnect and it is planned to start operating from 2022. The project aims to link hydro power from Norway with wind energy from Scotland.

WINDFARM UPDATES

Dumfries & Galloway: Plans have been submitted by Glenmuckloch Renewable Energy for an eight turbine windfarm next to the former opencast coal mine at Glenmuckloch, north of Kirkconnel [Jul 15]. The project is part of wider proposals for an energy park. The local authority has received 135 letters of support for the scheme and two in opposition. However, planning officials have said the development would have an adverse impact and have recommended refusal.

Scottish Borders: Infinis' nine turbine Windy Edge windfarm, south of Hawick, has been approved by a Scottish Government reporter [Sep 15]. The local authority had rejected the plans due to concerns over its effect on the landscape and said that it was 'incongruous and anachronistic.' However, the reporter found it would have 'no unacceptable environmental impacts' and ruled that it could proceed.

BATWIND

Five floating turbines are to be installed 15 miles off Peterhead, acting as a floating windfarm battery system. Stephen Bull, of developers Statoil, said: "By developing innovative battery storage solutions, we can improve the value of wind energy for both Statoil and customers. With Batwind, we can optimize the energy system from wind park to grid. Battery storage represents a new application in our offshore wind portfolio, contributing to realising our ambition of profitable growth in this area." The Batwind programme will be managed by ORE Catapult and Scottish Enterprise.

LOCHGOILHEAD HYDRO

Broadlands Energy (Donich) Ltd is building a 1.35 MW hydro project on the Donich Water near Lochgoilhead in Argyll, with the land being leased for 40 years through a deal with Forest Enterprise Scotland and Scottish Water. Lochgoil Community Development Trust has secured £740,000 backing from the Scottish Government's Renewable Energy Investment Fund (REIF), delivered by Scottish Enterprise, which allows it to obtain a 20% share of the scheme.

The Scottish Government's Community & Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES) team also assisted the Lochgoil Community Development Trust with advice and financial support to secure the REIF funding package.

OPENCAST COAL

Hargreaves' plans for the Rigg North opencast mine near Kirkconnel in Dumfries & Galloway have been withdrawn due to the 'challenging economic climate' [Apr 16]. The company acknowledged that it was unfair to leave the scheme in abeyance for an 'excessive period' as the uncertainty left an 'element of blight over neighbouring properties.'

SOLAR FARMS

Environmental Energy Investments 5 MW solar farm in the Kilsyth Hills, with 50,295 solar panels on 67 acres of farmland, has been approved by North Lanarkshire Council

Objections were received from Kilsyth Community Council and the local authority's archaeological service, the planning department and its landscape department as well as Cumbernauld airport. The proposal is contrary to the council's local plan and is in the greenbelt on the site of the Battle of Kilsyth. Objectors said that the council's policy of keeping windfarms away from the southern Kilsyth Hills would be undermined. The planning permission includes conditions for archaeological protection and visual screening.

- A 13 MW solar scheme, constructed on 70 acres of land at Errol Estate in Perthshire, is now operational [Jan 16]. The solar farm, the largest in Scotland, has 55,000 solar panels and is operated by Canadian Solar.

**RECREATION & TOURISM****JOHN O'GROATS TRAIL**

A new long-distance route, the John o'Groats Trail, links Inverness with the most northerly point on the British mainland. The 145 mile route connects the far north of the Highlands into the trail networks of Scotland and the UK for the first time.

ABERDEEN MARINE CENTRE

The Press & Journal reported that a £5m marine education centre is being planned for Greyhope Bay near Aberdeen, which will feature a special platform for viewing bottlenose dolphins.

**NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS****HDWT**

Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust has opened a new marine wildlife visitor centre in Tobermory on the Isle of Mull. The centre will strengthen conservation action for whales, dolphins, and porpoises, and help develop the Hebrides' appeal as a wildlife tourism hotspot.

The new centre was funded as part of a grant of almost £220,000 from the UK Government's Coastal Communities Fund. 24 of the world's estimated 92 cetacean species – including many national and international conservation priority species – have been recorded in the region.

The Coastal Communities Fund has also funded a refurbishment of the trust's research yacht, *Silurian*, which is used to monitor cetaceans each year.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

Professor Sheila Rowan MBE has been appointed as Scotland's Chief Scientific Adviser. She will help to ensure that science informs the Scottish Government's work, and advise on the impact that new developments in science may have." The post has been vacant since December 2014, when Professor Muffy Calder stepped down.

SWT

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) has acquired Little Linga, an island off Stronsay in Orkney, which is a key breeding site for seals and seabirds. Little Linga is an important colony for the Atlantic grey seal, with approximately 500 pups being born on the island each autumn. It also has a breeding population of around 80 pairs of cormorants on raised nests of seaweed and 200 pairs of fulmars. Ferne Animal Sanctuary, which purchased Little Linga more than 25 years ago to prevent the risk of seal pup culling on the island and ensure its future as a sanctuary for wildlife, has gifted the island to the SWT.