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CONSERVATION

GOLDEN EAGLE DISAPPEARANCE

RSPB Scotland has issued an appeal for information following the disappearance of a young, satellite-tagged golden eagle in the Monadhliath mountains. The chick hatched in Galloway.

Dave Anderson, of the Scottish Raptor Study Group (SRSG), said: "I was privileged to satellite-tag this large female chick in July 2015 with a fellow member of the SRSG who monitors the site. This bird was the first successful fledging from any nest in this area since 2010. The data we were receiving from her was of great interest as we followed her journey northwards to Cairngorms National Park, with excellent location information. We were looking forward to seeing if she would head south again later in the year, however the tag stopped transmitting abruptly on the 18 May 2016, shortly after her first birthday. This is a very sad end to arguably one of the most important golden eagle chicks fledged that year in Scotland."

Since November 2011, eight golden eagles all less than three years old and fitted with satellite transmitters have disappeared in the same area. The birds were being monitored by RSPB Scotland, the Highland Foundation for Wildlife, Natural Research Ltd and Forestry Commission Scotland.

Ian Thomson, of RSPB Scotland, said: "It is surely no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of satellite-tagged birds of prey that have disappeared in Scotland have been in areas intensively managed for gamebird shooting and in areas that have an appalling previous record of confirmed incidents of raptor persecution. These eight birds have all disappeared in an area where driven grouse moor management dominates the landscape, and where there have been many previous cases of illegal killing of protected raptors, including the poisoning of a golden eagle and a white-tailed eagle as recently as 2010.

"Given the reliability of the transmitters, the chance of so many birds disappearing over such a short timescale without some kind of human interference is so small as to be negligible. The pattern we see here is consistent with the birds having been killed and the transmitters destroyed. Once again, the commendable positive efforts of those landowners and estates who welcome golden eagles and host their nesting attempts, including elsewhere in the Monadhliaths, are being catastrophically undermined by those who have a complete disregard for the law, and who continue to threaten the conservation status of these magnificent birds.

"All of these eagles were young birds exploring Scotland before establishing their own territories and with their disappearance any potential future breeding by them to aid the population's recovery is also lost. We ask that if anyone can provide information as to the fate of these eagles that they contact Police Scotland or RSPB Scotland's investigations team."

Roseanna Cunningham, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, climate change and land reform, said: "The latest reports of satellite-tagged golden eagles disappearing on or near grouse moors are very disturbing and disappointing. That is why I have instructed officials to analyse the evidence from around 90 surviving and missing satellite-

tagged eagles, to discover if there is a pattern of suspicious activity. Grouse moor management does help species such as curlew and golden plover as well as generating much-needed rural employment and income but this cannot be at any price. The public rightly expects all businesses in Scotland to obey the law. Let me be clear, grouse shooting is no exception. As previously stated, the Scottish Government is prepared to introduce further regulation of shooting businesses if necessary. It will be unfortunate if the activities of a few bring further regulation on the whole sector, but that is the risk those who defy the law and defy public opinion are running."

Tim Baynes, of the Scottish Moorland Group, said: "Our organisation is an enthusiastic member of the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime and our members are committed to golden eagle conservation across Scotland. There is no clear evidence of the golden eagles having even died in the Monadhliath area, let alone having been 'persecuted' on grouse moors as RSPB is alleging. It is now over a month since the disappearance of this latest eagle and it would have been in everyone's interests if the matter had been raised immediately. There are other explanations for satellite tags stopping working and the failure of RSPB to involve land managers in trying to establish the facts is disappointing. Anyone with any information regarding the disappearance of an eagle should contact the police."

HEN HARRIER

RSPB Scotland reported that a satellite-tagged hen harrier, which fledged in Aberdeenshire in July, has stopped transmitting in the Monadhliath Mountains, near Slochd Summit. The male raptor was being monitored by the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime Scotland scheme.

RSPB Scotland said that its tag last sent information on 3 August from moorland managed for grouse shooting around Tomatin. The Scottish Gamekeepers Association said there was 'no independent information' on the situation.

Ian Thomson, RSPB Scotland's head of investigations, said: "This latest disappearance of a satellite tagged bird is deeply concerning, and joins the long list of protected birds of prey that have been confirmed to have been illegally killed or disappeared suddenly in this area. The transmitters being fitted to these birds are exceedingly reliable, and illegal persecution is therefore the most likely explanation of the disappearance of these birds of prey. The absence of typical breeding raptor species from areas of suitable habitat, or at traditional nesting sites, in large parts of the Monadhliaths is further supporting evidence of a major problem with wildlife crime in this general area.

"This case is all the more depressing as the nest from which Elwood (the chick) successfully fledged was monitored as part of a partnership project between PAW Scotland and the local landowner. It proves, yet again, that despite there being a good number of enlightened estates who are happy to host and protect nesting birds of prey – as soon as they move away from these areas they are being illegally killed. The denials and obfuscation from representatives of the land



management sector, and their consistent failure to acknowledge and address this problem, is one of the main reasons why our bird of prey populations are struggling in the central and eastern Highlands.

“We repeat our call to the Scottish Government to introduce a robust system of licensing of game bird hunting, where the right to shoot is dependent on legal and sustainable management of the land, in line with approaches adopted in most other European countries.”

A spokesman for the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) said: “As with other recent allegations, the SGA will work with Police Scotland and Scottish Government in an attempt to get to the bottom of this. It is clearly a situation which cannot go on. We have no independent information, at the present time, so getting the facts will be the first step. Speculation, at this stage, will not help. The SGA does not, and will never, condone wildlife crime. As an organisation we advocate legal solutions, solely, as the means to resolve conflicts. If there is any evidence of illegal activity by an SGA member, appropriate action will be taken.”

Tim Baynes, of the Scottish Moorland Group, said: “We are as concerned as anyone when a satellite-tagged bird goes missing and particularly in this case because the bird was part of a project involving Scottish Land & Estates and our members. This bird was tagged on one of our member estates as part of the Heads Up For Harriers. Estates in the area where the bird went missing are also concerned but have not been approached by RSPB to help in any search. They are unaware of any incident and would be willing to help.” He said that the group condemned wildlife crime but said that RSPB Scotland had not considered other reasons for the loss of the tags.

Roseanna Cunningham said: “The news that a juvenile hen harrier has disappeared in the Monadhliaths, complete with its satellite tag, only weeks after it fledged, strengthens my determination to get to the truth about how, where and why raptors with functioning satellite tags seem to be regularly disappearing. I have asked for a review of all the evidence and I intend to ensure that data from hen harriers and red kites, as well as data from golden eagles will be considered as part of this. We are continuing to collect evidence in relation to raptors in Scotland, which will be a significant factor in deciding the next steps for tackling wildlife crime.”

AYRSHIRE BUZZARD

The Scottish SPCA is appealing for information following the discovery of a young dead buzzard in Ayrshire. A member of the public found the bird on farmland between Maybole and Patna in April. Toxicology results indicate it had been poisoned with a lethal pesticide. The SSPCA believes this was the result of ‘a deliberate act.’

WILDCATS

The *BBC News* website reported that Scottish Wildcat Action (SWA) set up 347 camera traps in five wildcat priority areas in Angus Glens, Strathgogie in Aberdeenshire, Strathpeffer (Easter Ross), Strathavon (Moray) and northern Strathspey to record data over a 60 day period. More than a third of the cameras captured images of cats, most of which turned out to be feral cats or hybrids: 620 square miles were surveyed. At least 19 wildcats have been seen so far, in four out of the five priority areas. The animals are scored on ‘pelage’ or coat markings.

SWA is now beginning a new phase of the project to trap, neuter and vaccinate feral

cats, which pose a threat to wildcats through hybridisation and disease.

Keri Langridge, of SWA, said: “We are finally at the stage where we have identified all the animals in the 200,000 trail-camera photos collected ... our next step during the coming months is to use sophisticated statistical analyses to estimate the population density of wildcat in these areas based on the sample we found.”

The survey also detected more than 20 other species, including a raccoon which is not native to Scotland. The most common species found were roe deer (63% of trail cameras) followed by pine marten (60%) and badgers (45%).

SMALL BLUE BUTTERFLY

The small blue butterfly had been completely absent from Ayrshire since the 1980s but bred successfully this year, for the third year in a row, on the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT)'s Gailes Marsh reserve and neighbouring Dundonald Links [Jul 13]. Large areas of kidney vetch (the butterfly's only food plant) were created on the sandy soils, and a carefully managed translocation took place in 2013. SWT worked in partnership with Butterfly Conservation Scotland and links golf courses south of Irvine to expand the habitat.

The R&A, golf's governing body, is supporting the habitat enhancement work with £33,000 of funding from 2015 to 2018. Steve Isaac, of R&A said: “The continued success of the small blue is exciting news and an example of how golf courses can help protect and conserve our wildlife. Golf courses have tremendous potential in this regard, and it is good to see the greenkeepers of the Ayrshire coast working closely with SWT and Butterfly Conservation Scotland to provide safe haven for pollinators.”

Small blue, the UK's smallest butterfly, is a priority species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

ROADSIDE VERGES

Plantlife has launched a campaign to save nature on road verges and is asking councils to delay cutting verges until August or later, to allow plants to seed. Grass clippings should also be removed because if left to lie they damage plant diversity. Plantlife said that there are over 550 different species of wild flowers growing on nearly 10,000 hectares of verges in Scotland, providing nectar and pollen for bees, butterflies and other insects.

Dr Deborah Long, of Plantlife Scotland, said: “Road verges can act as refuges for wild flowers where plants are left long enough to set seed before cutting. This has double benefits: we conserve those flowers for future generations and it saves councils money by delaying cutting.”

Catherine Lloyd, of Tayside Biodiversity Partnership, stressed that councils were getting better at managing their verges, though there were still problems. “In Perthshire, loss of flowering plants is one of the key causes of declining bee and butterfly populations. In many places the verge management does not take this into consideration. The all-important consideration is to find funding to help the local authorities manage the verges for biodiversity: they cannot do this alone with the current budget cuts.”

James Silvey, of RSPB Scotland, said: “When tended and cared for properly they should really be seen as wildlife highways that can attract a rich diversity of wildlife. With the right management verges can provide homes for small mammals – food for the kestrels and owls that feed on them – and nectar rich highways for our native pollinators.”

A spokesman for Argyll & Bute Council, said: “In the interest of the safety of road users we cut

our verges earlier in the year – around May – and again at this time of year.”

INVERNSNAID GOATS

RSPB Scotland has used contraceptive darts to control the wild goat population on its Inversnaid Reserve the east side of Loch Lomond [Nov 13]. RSPB Scotland said that 50 goats, about a third of the population, had been darted by marksmen who spent about two weeks on site. It is the first time that the technique using an immuno-contraceptive, which cuts out the goats' mating urge, has been used in Scotland.

Dave Beaumont, of RSPB Scotland, said that it was hoped that the use of the drug would bring the population of goats down without any of them having to be culled; the drug lasts for three years and works on both sexes. He said: “The last thing we really want to do as a conservation organisation is to be shooting things. Trying to find a non-lethal method here has been particularly challenging. We could fence the whole thing and move any herbivores to the outside, but that would in effect keep them away from any winter shelter or food. They would starve or die of hypothermia on the hill. The more traditional method of using a stalker has been used in the past but nowadays public perceptions are that you should avoid using lethal control at all costs. With natural mortality [the darting] should bring the population down without us firing a single shot.”

The darting is intended to stop some of the goats breeding so as to protect the Pollochro Woods which make up 222 acres of the reserve. Scottish Natural Heritage said that the woods, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), are being damaged by goat grazing. However, the goats are a tourist attraction, especially on the West Highland Way, and there has been opposition to the cull.

CANNA EAGLES

White-tailed sea eagles have had a successful breeding season on the Isle of Canna in the Small Isles. Two breeding pairs of the birds are both rearing two chicks. Dr Richard Luxmoore, of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) which owns Canna, said: “Canna has proven to be a very productive breeding site for sea eagles and most years since reintroduction we have had two pairs nesting on the island. It is not so common to have both pairs successfully raise two chicks each so this is great news.”

Canna's golden eagles are rearing a single chick. NTS said that Canna is believed to have the highest density of eagles in Scotland.

FRESHWATER PEARLS

Gravel embankments have been removed along 500 metres of the Allt an t-Slugain burn, a tributary on the River Dee near Braemar, to restore habitat for the freshwater pearl mussel and for salmon. The burn is within the Cairngorms National Park. Removing the embankments, built in the 1980s, will allow the burn to naturally re-meander over time, further slowing the flow of water into the River Dee. Infilled connections to old channels will also be re-opened as part of the works.

Restoring the natural flow of the burn will increase spawning habitat for salmon, the host species of freshwater pearl mussel larvae. More than 2.5 km of new stock fences were installed to keep livestock off the riverbanks, allowing vegetation to establish. Native trees will be planted along the banks to provide dappled shade over the water and enhance the habitat for the wildlife that lives in and around the streams.

The work is part of the Pearls in Peril LIFE project, working in partnership with the Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and River Dee Trust.

NATTERJACK TOADS

The *Herald* reported that numbers of natterjack toads have increased at RSPB Scotland's Mersehead Reserve on the Solway coast. A three year project, which began in 2014, recorded 45 toads on the reserve in the first year, but last year there were 180 individuals. The number of natterjacks has been in decline in Scotland since the 1970s. Two years ago, there were 200 breeding adults, concentrated in a few sites on the Solway.

GUGA HUNT

The *BBC News* website reported that a study was commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) into the traditional guga hunt, on Sula Sgeir, north of Ness on Lewis [Sep 15]. About 2,000 gannet chicks, or guga, are harvested each year in August.

An SNH spokesman said: "We recognise the importance and cultural significance of the guga hunt. Indeed the provision to licence it through the Wildlife & Countryside Act reflects this. The survey data we have demonstrates that northern gannets are faring fairly well on Sula Sgeir. The count data available to us give us reassurance that the annual harvest of 2,000 gugas appears to be sustainable. The modelling work we commissioned confirms our view that a harvest of 2,000 is sustainable in the long term, and that this is likely to be fairly robust in the face of any changes in breeding success or adult survival. We do consider this licence ensures this traditional activity can be maintained, and that it is not about maximising the potential harvest of gannets from an internationally important site designated for this species."

**FARMING****AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES**

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) called for a full reform of agricultural subsidies in Scotland. Scottish agriculture receives around £600m in public support each year, the majority of which comes through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). 80% of Scotland's land area (6.2m hectares) is used for agriculture. However, only a small proportion supports healthy ecosystems and wildlife. SWT believes that a complete redesign of agricultural policy is required to ensure that public money provides benefits including long term improvements to habitat quality, increasing biodiversity on farmland and connecting habitats on a landscape scale.

Jonathan Hughes, of SWT, said: "We commend the National Trust [for England, Wales & Northern Ireland] for setting out the six principles for a new agricultural support system post-Brexit. These principles are very much aligned to the SWT's own stated policies on both sustainable agriculture and upland land use. For too long, hundreds of millions of pounds a year have been handed out in farming subsidies for very little benefit to the taxpayer, our shared environment and the wildlife that depends on the health of our environment. In fact, badly targeted subsidies have often led to expensive problems such as flooding, soil erosion, water pollution and biodiversity loss.

"There is still some uncertainty whether Scotland can remain part of the European Union but whatever scenario plays out, the Scottish Government should completely redesign our current agricultural policy so it rewards those farmers and land managers who deliver public benefits in the form of clean water, healthy soils, nutritious food and thriving wildlife. We stand together with the National Trust, our colleagues

in the Wildlife Trust movement and many other environmental organisations across the UK in calling for root and branch reform of our outmoded, distorting and damaging agriculture policy."

The Wildlife Trusts support the six principles set out by the National Trust (figures relate to the UK):

- **Public money must only pay for public goods:** Currently, most of a £3.1bn fund paid from the EU (out of the £3.1bn CAP funding to the UK) benefits wildlife and the environment. The majority of the remainder is allocated based on the size of farm. There will need to be a transition to the new world but this basic income support payment should be removed

- **It should be unacceptable to harm nature but easy to help it:** Currently, only one third of the basic payment is conditional on meeting 'green' farming standards. In the future, 100% of any public payment should be conditional on meeting higher standards of wildlife, soil and water stewardship

- **Nature should be abundant everywhere:** The system needs to support nature in the lowlands as well as the uplands – people in towns and cities also need access to wildlife, recreation and the services the environment provides

- **We need to drive better outcomes for nature, thinking long-term and on a large scale:** Nature doesn't respect farm boundaries and needs joined up habitats on a landscape scale with subsidies implemented on a farm-by-farm basis. In the future, we should start at the landscape level, with farmers and landowners working collaboratively to set plans based on clear outcomes

- **Farmers that deliver the most public benefit, should get the most:** Currently, the more land you own, the more money you get. In the future, those farmers and land managers who get the most public money should be those who deliver the best outcomes

- **We must invest in science, new technology and new markets that help nature:** Currently, some science and technology harms nature – it increases crop yields with big machines and harmful fertilizers. In the future, public money should help create ways of farming that benefit nature and help develop new markets to reward farmers for storing carbon, preventing floods and promoting biodiversity.

See: <http://bit.ly/2azSc54>

CAP

NFU Scotland is bidding to persuade farming minister, Fergus Ewing, to strip out the 'gold-plating' of the Scotland-only greening rules [Mar 16]. NFU Scotland said that Scottish crop producers are at a competitive disadvantage to English growers, because of standards being 'above and beyond' those required by the EU. Ian Sands, of NFU Scotland, said: "The Brexit vote may change support arrangements in the future, but until we are officially out of Europe and no longer benefitting from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) we must continue to operate as before – and that means seeking significant changes to our greening requirements to remove the gold-plating introduced at Scottish level."

NFU Scotland considers that areas which can be changed include the growing of nitrogen-fixing crops (NFCs) to meet greening requirements, the use of conversion factors when calculating Ecological Focus Areas (EFAs), grazing on buffer strips; management of fallow land and a greater choice of EFA options including forestry and hedges. Mr Sands said: "On using NFCs to meet EFA requirements, Scotland-only management rules on harvesting and field margins put Scottish

growers at a competitive disadvantage with respect to growers in England. For 2016, a third management prescription was added for Scotland, requiring farmers growing NFC as an EFA option to grow at least two such crops. The area of the largest crop must not account for 75% or more of the NFC EFA crop. For many growers, that makes this impractical and on farms with a relatively small EFA obligation, the smaller of the crops would be too small."

NFU Scotland also said that the requirement for livestock farmers to have a record of intended nitrogen and lime applications to all their permanent grassland is no more than a 'compliance trip wire' with no positive environmental outcome. Unlike the rest of the British Isles and Ireland, the Scottish Government had not chosen to simplify the measuring of EFA land.

BREXIT

The *Scottish Farming Leader* reported that NFU Scotland met with UK Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, to discuss the UK government's commitment to agricultural funding until 2020 and its distribution, via the Barnett formula or other means. NFU Scotland elaborated on the ten commitments it wishes the UK government to take forward for agriculture. Alan Bowie, of NFU Scotland, said: "Whilst the UK treasury's announcement that current levels of Pillar 1 spending would be maintained to 2020 has essentially delivered one of the unions' ten commitments, we need government to deliver certainty on the nine remaining priorities ... although the treasury has guaranteed payments for the basic payment scheme, greening, sheep coupled and cattle coupled support up to 2020, there has been no commitment for Pillar 2 funding, for example, Less Favoured Area Support Schemes (LFASS) or agri-environment schemes ...

"The Scottish public values the contribution that farmers and land managers make and the access they have to our beautiful, managed environment across the whole of Scotland. Most crofters and farmers wish they could deliver these benefits without the need for financial support however the reality is the marketplace does not allow that to happen and does not value much of the work that farmers and crofters do. The LFASS and agri-environment schemes are a way of paying for this market failure and funding for those schemes needs to be guaranteed in the same way that funding for direct payments has been."

Funding of all schemes under Pillar 1 all comes from the EU. Schemes under Pillar 2, notably LFASS and agri-environment schemes, are co-financed by the EU and the Scottish Government. 70% of LFASS comes from the Scottish budget. Under the current allocation of the UK's Pillar 1 CAP budget, Scotland receives some 16%; it could drop to 10% under the Barnett formula for distributing public spending within the UK.

ORKNEY GEESE

The Orkney goose management project has entered its final year. The greylag goose adaptive management pilot allows local people to control the resident greylag geese population. Licensed shooting takes place with experienced local guns in August and September before migratory birds from Iceland arrive in October. This helps keep the population down to reduce impact on farming while maintaining the species' conservation interest. Geese taken as part of the pilot project will continue to be recorded and numbers monitored. The aim is a sustainably managed goose population which generates income for local people.

Resident greylag geese in Orkney have increased over the past 20 years. The estimated population in 2001 was 1,500 birds which peaked at 22,911

in August 2014. The goose count in August 2015 showed a small reduction in the population with 21,354 birds recorded.

The pilot project is being trialled in Scotland under the auspices of SNH and advised by the National Goose Management Review Group. The Local Goose Management Group includes NFUS, Scottish Government Rural Payments & Services, Scotland's Rural College and local farmers.

Over the last four years, the project has managed to prevent the expansion of the population of resident greylag geese in Orkney which without the project shooting could be in the region of 50,000 birds. The target for this year is to shoot 7,000 resident greylag geese; 5,800 were shot in 2015.

The Orkney Goose Management Group will be reviewing the pilot at the end of the season and identify ways in which the population of greylag geese can continue to be managed sustainably.

There are currently four greylag goose pilots in Scotland which enable local people to manage resident greylag goose populations; one in Orkney; one in the Uists; the scheme in Coll and Tiree, and another in Lewis & Harris [Jul 16].

CROFTING

The *BBC News* website reported that the Scottish Government has disagreed with the Crofting Commission convener, Colin Kennedy, and his handling of a dispute about the running of common grazing land on Lewis [Jun 16]. Rural Affairs Secretary, Fergus Ewing, wrote to the commission concerning the dispute over the interpretation of crofting law. He warned that action may be required if Mr Kennedy continued to adopt an opposing interpretation of the rules. Mr Kennedy said that he stands by the decisions made by the commission in the dispute and said that the decisions taken were made after reasoned debate and consensus.

AMERICAN FOULBROOD

A hive of honey bees has been destroyed at an apiary in Scaniport, near Inverness after the insects were found to be infected with American Foulbrood (AFB). The Scottish Government said that there was a ban in place on the movement of bees and related equipment from the area.

VENISON

The Scottish Venison Partnership (SVP) has called for more conventional livestock producers to switch to farming deer to keep up with demand. The UK imports around one third of the venison it consumes, and one third of Scottish production is exported to Europe, mostly venison from roe deer and late season red from stags. Farmed venison is imported as the UK is unable to produce enough volume from farmed stock which gives consistency in terms of age, colour, eatability and conformation of the meat.

The total UK venison production is around 3,800 tonnes, of which 70% comes from Scotland's wild red deer cull, with other species, both Scottish farmed and wild, making up the remainder. Imports from New Zealand in 2015 were around 900 tonnes, with additional product coming from Poland, Ireland and Spain. Scottish deer farmers are now eligible for the basic farm support payment, after years of being excluded from the system.

Bill Brewster, of SVP, said: "Deer management covers many facets. Not least deer welfare and maintaining a deer herd in good health, ensuring that deer numbers are sustainable in terms of the environment and other land uses, providing employment and, not least, ensuring the supply of a healthy food."



WOODLANDS

FUTURE OF FORESTRY

The Scottish Government is consulting on proposals to keep Scotland's forests in public ownership and to enhance the sector's economic, environmental and social benefits. The forestry sector is worth £1 billion annually and supports around 25,000 jobs. The National Forest Estate, covers more than 640,000 hectares, or about 8.2% of Scotland's land mass.

The Scottish Government is proposing:

- The creation of Forestry & Land Scotland, which will focus initially on management and development of the National Forest Estate
- A dedicated Forestry Division in the Scottish Government to take forward policy and regulation activities, currently the function of Forestry Commission Scotland
- Potential for expanding the remit of Forestry & Land Scotland in the future to maximise the benefit of other publicly-owned land
- A new, modern legislative framework for the development, support and regulation of forestry
- Priorities for cross-border arrangements that suit Scotland's needs

Scottish ministers currently determine strategy and policy for forestry in Scotland but the management of forestry, including of the Scottish ministers' National Forest Estate, has remained with the Forestry Commissioners (a UK non-ministerial department and, since devolution, a cross-border public authority).

The consultation states: "The existing governance and accountability arrangements are complex and outmoded, and do not reflect the post-devolution landscape or operating environment. The Forestry Commission itself is gradually moving its functions away from the centre to individual countries and, since 2013, there has been uncertainty about the remaining Forestry Commission GB arrangements. We want to establish simpler and more straightforward governance arrangements so that the management of forestry in Scotland is fully accountable to the Scottish ministers and to the Scottish Parliament."

Charles Dundas, of the Woodland Trust Scotland, said: "We need an independent Forestry Commission in Scotland to look after our important woodland sector. It certainly shouldn't be abolished and merged into government as this consultation suggests. The Forestry Commission in Scotland does a great job and is one of the most trusted names in Scottish public life, so although it's good to tidy up the loose ends from devolution, we need to make sure that the decisions the Scottish Government take about its future are in the best interests of Scotland's woods and trees. We believe that means it should continue as a small government agency of expert foresters, and not have its role absorbed by a government department."

The consultation closes on 9 November. See: <https://consult.scotland.gov.uk/forestry/future-of-forestry>



FISHFARMING & FISHERIES

SEAL SHOOTING

The charity, OneKind, has released figures which show that 1,531 seals were killed by salmon farms, salmon netting stations and angling groups between 2011 and 2015. Under the licensing system which allows seals to be killed in Scotland,

the carcasses should be recovered and sent for a post-mortem examination. However, only 91 carcasses were recovered over the period and 40 sent for a post-mortem. Harry Huyton, of OneKind, said: "While we understand that safety must come first and therefore many carcasses cannot be recovered, the extremely low recovery rate is surprising and disappointing."

OneKind called for ministers and the fishing industry to phase out seal shooting entirely by 2020.

ELECTROFISHING

A consultation on the future of electrofishing has been launched by the Scottish Government. The technique to catch razor clams is currently banned by the European Union. However, a report by Marine Scotland found that it had a lower environmental impact than more traditional methods [Oct 14]. Scottish fishermen have called for the government to apply for an exemption to the EU rules. The Netherlands and Belgium have secured exemptions from the EU law.

Rural Economy Secretary, Fergus Ewing, said: "Marine Scotland has undertaken comprehensive research on the impact of electrofishing on the surrounding environment and the catch, and have concluded that it is a relatively benign way of harvesting razor clams. Electrofishing is currently illegal in Scotland and Marine Scotland compliance has taken a range of measures to tackle this illegal activity. Enforcement has proved to be very difficult and changes need to be made to either make it easier to enforce the current law or, if electrofishing is to be legalised, to ensure any electrofishing is undertaken safely and sustainably in a properly-regulated environment. As a result of this advice and extensive consultation with the industry, we have now decided to consult on proposals to amend the current law to allow electrofishing to be a legal method for catching razor clams."

The consultation ends on 30 September. See: <http://bit.ly/2b9n4tf>

SPEY CATCHES

The Strathspey & Badenoch Herald reported that catches of salmon on the River Spey so far this year have been the best since 2008. 3,940 salmon and grise were caught between 11 February and 30 June, a 38% increase on last year. The Spey Fishery Board said that anglers released 94% of the fish caught. Sea trout catches fell from 1,139 in 2015 to 645 for the same period this year.

RIVER ECOLOGY IMPROVEMENT

The Rivers & Fisheries Trusts of Scotland (RAFTS), in partnership with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and Galloway Fisheries Trust, is removing an old unused weir, a barrier to fish migration and improving river ecology on the Old Mill Burn and Tarff water in Dumfries & Galloway. Around 10 km of river will once again be accessible to native migrating fish.

Rob Mitchell, of RAFTS, said: "Migratory fish species such as salmon and sea trout are under pressure due to a number of different factors. In the river environment, increasing and improving habitat is the most effective way to increase juvenile production. The easement or removal of barriers to fish migration such as the Creamery Weir is a very effective way to enable access to otherwise inaccessible habitat.

Since 2008, SEPA has made almost £8m of funding available through the Water Environment Fund to help a range of community groups, fisheries trusts and environmental charities improve the physical condition of Scottish rivers, including the removal of redundant fish barriers. 14 obstructions have been removed and access restored for fish to over 3000 km of Scotland's watercourses. The

fund is provided by the Scottish Government and administered by SEPA to provide key objectives of the River Basin Management Plan for Scotland.

CLYDE REGULATING ORDER

The Scottish Government has rejected the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust (SIFT)'s proposed Regulating Order (RO) for Clyde shellfisheries [Dec 15]. This would have given local fishermen and other stakeholders in fisheries management, and given the Clyde a chance to recover from over-exploitation. SIFT is now seeking an urgent meeting with Marine Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary for Fisheries, Ferguson Ewing.

SIFT welcomes some of the management measures introduced under the Marine Protected Areas process but said that these measures were not implemented to directly benefit or improve the Clyde fisheries and so there remains a continuing need for a holistic fisheries management plan as was proposed in the Regulating Order application. SIFT said that here is now an urgent need for the Clyde Marine Planning Partnership and the South West Inshore Fisheries Group to produce tangible fisheries management proposals for the Clyde.

RONA BOX

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that fishermen have been reassured that the Rona box, a stretch of water separate to the submarine testing range between Raasay and the mainland, will be reopened to fishing following expansion of the main range [Jun 16]. A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said: "Plans to enhance the Raasay Ranges will see withdrawal from the permanently manned range control facilities on Rona. The work currently carried out there will be transferred to the British Underwater Test & Evaluation Centre on the Applecross Peninsula and Kyle of Lochalsh. Since the new byelaws covering the Raasay Ranges were established in June, the installation of new range infrastructure has been underway, which will enable the closure of the Rona site from 2017. Fishing restrictions currently in place around the island will then be lifted. In the meantime, fishermen should continue to avoid fishing in the exclusion zone as has previously been the case."



MARINE

PRESTWICK BEACH

The *BBC News* website reported that Prestwick beach in Ayrshire was closed to the public whilst work was undertaken to remove asbestos contamination.

South Ayrshire Council said it was working closely with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), NHS Ayrshire & Arran and expert scientific advisers to deal with the problem and consider all possible implications. The council is actively investigating the source of this material in conjunction with a specialist contractor. The asbestos is believed to have been washed ashore after being in the water for a considerable time and the risk to health has been deemed negligible. Other beaches nearby have been checked and given the all clear. The beach will continue to be monitored for contamination.

Mike Tomlinson, of Prestwick North Community Council, said the community council had been 'pestering' the local authority to clean up the beach and said that the building rubble, including asbestos, is coming from a landfill tip along the coast. The sea defences have been breached and the landfill is being bought across by waves to the beach.

PRIORITY MARINE FEATURES

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), in partnership with Marine Scotland and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, has published a catalogue which describes Scotland's 81 Priority Marine Features (PMFs), the habitats and species considered to be conservation priorities in Scottish waters. The list includes 55 species and 26 habitat types. The descriptions cover each feature's characteristics, environmental preferences, distribution and status.

SNH Commissioned Report 406: Descriptions of Scottish Priority Marine Features can be obtained free online: <http://bit.ly/2aKr8Rx>

OIL RIG AGROUND

The *Oban Times* reported that Angus MacNeil MP called on the UK government to reinstate the Emergency Towing Vessel (ETV), based in Stornoway, after an oil rig, *Transocean Winner*, ran aground on Dalmore beach near Carloway on the Isle of Lewis whilst being towed during severe gales [Jul 16].

He said: "Once again our waters were under threat and we are fortunate that the grounding of this oil rig posed no risk to life. However, this could have been a very different outcome and the UK government must return the ETV to Stornoway. I have long argued that a tug is an insurance policy from an unusual but statistically possible event. I am also calling on the UK government to carry out an immediate investigation as to why this oil rig was being towed in severe winds west of the Hebrides and also asking about the response time and distance the Orkney tug had to travel to the scene."

The *BBC News* online reported that the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) said that two of the rig's four tanks, holding 280 tonnes of diesel, have been breached; it is estimated that 56,000 litres of diesel have leaked into the sea but much of it has 'been evaporated' according to *Transocean* or dispersed by strong winds. Western Isles Council said that a 'low level' of pollution had been detected by tests but daily shoreline inspections by SEPA had detected no visible signs of pollution. A verification flight by the MCA counter-pollution team has been carried out and no evidence of pollution in the area was found.

The *Herald* reported that the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) said that the rig had run aground very close to the Gallan Head Marine Environment High Risk Area (MEHRA), identified after the Braer oil spill in 1993 [May 94]. The *Sunday Herald* reported that Calum Duncan, of MCS, said: "Over ten years ago, environment organisations warned that without effective management measures, the longed-called-for MEHRAs would be pointless. The company involved and relevant government departments have to answer serious questions about why this happened off a sensitive headland, a MEHRA, in potentially difficult seas. They have let down the people and wildlife of Lewis. What emergency response vessels were in place and had they been notified? Were any specific measures in place in the knowledge that passage would be in the vicinity of a MEHRA?" He also asked why there had only been one tow-line.

About 40 pieces of debris from the grounding of the drilling rig was found on Dalmore beach on Lewis. The rig was towed off the rocks at spring tides, some two weeks after grounding, and moored at a temporary anchorage at Broad Bay on the east side of Lewis.

The *West Highland Free Press* called for an independent inquiry into the incident, along the lines of the Donaldson report after the *Braer* disaster in Shetland [Sep 94].

• A temporary 300 metre exclusion zone was put in place around the grounded rig. Duncan MacInnes, of Western Isles Fishermen's Association, said that four boats normally worked in that area; the fishermen are to seek compensation for lost earnings.

HARBOUR (COMMON) SEALS

SNH has published results of counts which show that harbour (common) seal numbers around Scotland's coast have increased over the last five years following years of decline. 36% of the total European population of harbour seals are found in Scotland.

The August seal surveys are carried out over an approximate five-year cycle on behalf of SNH by the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) at the University of St Andrews. The latest report presents results of 2015 surveys carried out in Shetland, the Moray Firth, the Firth of Tay and on Scotland's southern coasts, completing the current round-Scotland survey that started in 2011.

Between 2011 and 2015, a total of 25,399 harbour seals were counted on surveys. 20,430 were counted in the previous round-Scotland survey, but 29,514 were counted in the survey before that.

Over the last 15 years, the SMRU surveys have shown a decline in the numbers of harbour seals counted on the east of Scotland, particularly in Orkney and in the Firth of Tay & Eden Estuary. Although twice as many harbour seals (60) were counted in the Firth of Tay & Eden Estuary SAC in 2015 than the 29 counted in 2014, this is still less than 10% of the numbers which were generally counted in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the Moray Firth survey area 705 harbour seals were counted in 2015, slightly up from 693 the year before. These are the two lowest counts for the area. In Shetland 3,369 harbour seals were counted in 2015, an increase of 11% from the 3,039 counted in 2009; however, this is the first increase in Shetland since 1993. No harbour seals were counted on the south-east coast, between the English border and Aberlady Bay.

On the west coast, approximately 70% more seals were counted this time than in the previous Scotland-wide survey. Most recently, in the South-east Islay Skerries SAC, 1,087 harbour seals counted in 2015 represents a 63% increase over six years. Similarly, Southwest Scotland counts in 2015 are up 44% over eight years.

As part of a three-year programme to cover the whole of the Scottish coastline the numbers of seals on Orkney where numbers have been declining for a number of years, will be surveyed in 2016 together with the east coast of Scotland.

SNH Commissioned Report 929: Surveys of harbour and grey seals on the south-east (border to Aberlady Bay) and south-west (Sound of Jura to Solway Firth) coasts of Scotland, in Shetland, in the Moray Firth and in the Firth of Tay. See: <http://bit.ly/2bFu1nL>



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

PLANT BUG

Psallus montanus, a plant bug, has been found in Scotland for the first time on a birch tree at the RSPB's Insh Marshes nature reserve, near Kingussie, in the Highlands. *P. montanus* has only been recognised as a British species fairly recently similar to *P. betuleti*, which also occurs on birch.

GILLIES HILL

The *Herald* reported that Stirling Council has opposed plans to renew quarrying at Murrayhall Quarry on Gillies Hill, near Cambuslang and has asked the Scottish Government for a public

inquiry [Jun 15]. Paterson's Quarries Ltd sought permission to continue quarry at the site, which has not been operational since 1996 and has fauna and flora of national importance. The company has already appealed to the Scottish Government over the council's non-determination on the application to date.

PROSECUTIONS

Scottish Water was fined £7,500 at Kilmarnock Sheriff Court for causing the pollution of the Caaf Water and River Garnock in Dalry, Ayrshire.

The level of water in the Caaf Reservoir was drawn down through an inadequately monitored open valve which resulted in the discharge of sediment laden water, containing a high level of suspended solids from the reservoir, into the Caaf Water and the River Garnock on 24 May 2015. The Caaf Water and River Garnock are popular with countryside enthusiasts including anglers; as a result of this incident water heavily contaminated with sediment from the Caaf reservoir was introduced into these downstream watercourses at a concentration well beyond what would occur naturally, and the pollution remained visible for several days.

This 'serious failure in out-of-hours monitoring' resulted in detriment to the wildlife, which was striking, but the long term impact is unknown.

POLLUTION INCIDENT

A bull stud farm, at Knocknagael near Inverness, owned by the Scottish Government, has been polluting a burn with runoff containing faeces. The burn runs down through housing developments.

PROSECUTION

Farmer Alexander Wilson was fined £1,000, and his company R & A Wilson Ltd was fined £1,650, at Selkirk Sheriff Court for discharging dilute slurry and silage effluent into an unnamed tributary to the Clackmae Burn, into the Clackmae Burn and into the Leader Water, near Earlston in the Scottish Borders.

SEPA STRATEGY

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) has published a new strategy for regulation, *One Planet Prosperity – Our Regulatory Strategy*, aimed at enabling SEPA to tackle the 21st century challenges facing Scotland's environment. The strategy outlines SEPA's approach to delivering environmental protection and improvement in ways which will also create health benefits and sustainable economic growth.

Terry A'Hearn, of SEPA, said: "Under this strategy, SEPA will make two key contributions to making Scotland stronger. First, we will more quickly and powerfully get all Scottish businesses meeting the environmental laws in Scotland. Second, we will help as many Scottish businesses as possible go even further, helping them find profitable ways to go beyond what the law requires in reducing their use of energy, water and materials and the amount of waste they produce. By identifying where individual businesses and industry can go beyond compliance, Scotland has the unique opportunity to set the trend on a global scale. There are huge economic incentives for going beyond basic compliance. Especially as pressure on our current resources becomes greater, it will ultimately be businesses that are more sustainable that will continue to thrive, helping to create more lasting and inclusive growth in Scotland."

Drawing upon the new powers granted by the Regulatory Reform (Scotland) Act in 2014, SEPA will look to develop a range of regulatory tools through which to deliver the new strategy,

including a streamlined charging scheme, a suite of new enforcement powers and development of Sustainable Growth Agreements with industry leaders.

See: <http://bit.ly/2aYNNBF>

ARCTIC & ALPINE PLANTS

The Guardian reported that research by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) shows that rare mountain plants in the Highlands and islands are retreating higher or disappearing entirely, attributed to a steadily warming climate. The NTS has been monitoring results from the 1950s which show the impact of warmer temperatures at high altitude on protected species. It currently undertakes detailed research on a six year cycle, which is producing evidence of the long term trend towards extinction, particularly on the lower lying, south facing slopes.

Arctic plants are found only in a handful of locations in the Highlands and islands, clustered in north-facing gullies, corries and crevices, frequently protected by late-lying winter snow. These plants, relics from the last period of glaciation, are retreating higher up the mountainside or disappearing entirely. In some cases they are being replaced by grasses previously found at lower, warmer altitudes.

On Bidean nam Bian in Glencoe, field surveys have found a 50% decline in Highland saxifrage at lower altitudes compared to the numbers detected in 1995. One population declined from 300 plants in the 1990s to 31. Surveys on Ben Lawers found 'a very worrying decline' in the numbers of snow pearlwort, only found on Ben Lawers and surrounding mountains at heights above 900 metres. Half of the sites found in 1981 had now become extinct, although heavy snow in the recent winters had helped halt the effects of climate change.

The Nevis Landscape Partnership discovered Alpine saxifrage in new locations on Ben Nevis. It had not been seen on Ben Nevis until the first survey in 2014. New populations of Highland saxifrage, as well as Arctic mouse-ear and starwort mouse-ear were found.

Dan Watson, of NTS, said: "Our monitoring shows that climate change is affecting Scotland's mountains at an alarming rate. Trust monitoring tracks the decrease of rare arctic-alpine plants such as snow pearlwort (*Sagina nivalis*) on Ben Lawers and Highland saxifrage in Glencoe and shows how populations are declining at lower altitudes. Meanwhile, common temperate plants less able to cope with extreme climates are moving further up the hills. As the distribution of plants found at high altitude is changing, more work is required to confirm the extent of the problem. These results are firm evidence of the rise in mountain temperatures and the decrease in lying snow on southerly slopes and at lower altitudes. Current estimates indicate that snow cover at 1060 metres is projected to be reduced by 21% by the 2050s."

LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP

A working group of the Black Isle Partnership is looking to submit a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to establish a Landscape Partnership Scheme for the Black Isle. The schemes focus on heritage conservation in rural and peri-urban (the interface between urban and rural) regeneration. The aim is to conserve habitats on large scales through joined-up thinking and actions by local, regional and national organisations, resulting in benefits to both the landscapes and their communities.

The Black Isle Partnership working group welcomes suggestions for individual projects to contribute to the theme of: "To strengthen links between the people of the Black Isle and the land

and sea they live amongst." The first stage of the application will be submitted in May 2017.

Contact: blackislelapa@gmail.com

HILL TRACKS

The Scottish Farming Leader reported that the Scottish Government published the results of research into the review of prior notification requirements for hill tracks. Planning authorities received 279 prior notifications in 2014, with 22% being for agricultural tracks.

In 2014, the Town & Country planning (General Permitted Development) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Order removed permitted development rights for agricultural and forestry tracks in Scotland.

CAIRNGORMS DEVELOPMENTS

The Strathspey & Badenoch Herald reported that the Speyside Trust's Badaguish Outdoor Centre has been granted planning permission by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) for wigwams, cooking and toilet facilities and a carpark. Concern had been expressed by the Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group (BSCG), and others, about the piecemeal development of the respite holiday centre, the retrospective granting of planning permission and the disregard of imposed planning conditions.

Dr Gus Jones, of BSCG, said: "This is publicly owned land yet the National Park has acted against the public interest. In the heart of one of Scotland's most valued Caledonian forests, the authority has favoured constructing a totally unnecessary car park along with portaloos, instead of having the site landscaped and restored to native woodland as was originally planned. This is in complete contravention of the CNPA's own transport strategy, landscape and wildlife policies and the first aim of the park. The CNPA has failed to realise that its planning consents have created a massive scar on the landscape. It has only acknowledged that the new development is visible from the north, especially, for instance, the Meall a' Bhuacaille ridge. However, it is well known that this scar is also highly visible for miles around from the south, including from the iconic tops, and is likely to remain so for many years to come."

Bill Lobban, of the CNPA board, said: "Planning committee members continue to have reservations over the way development has been handled at Badaguish."

Andrew MacKenzie, of the Speyside Trust, said: "It's been a successful but challenging project transforming a badly drained, boggy 70 year old sitka spruce plantation back into a grass camping field."

A CNPA spokesman said: "This application for new, small-scale infrastructure at an existing outdoor recreation facility complies with the Local Development Plan and national planning policies."

- The CNPA's planning committee approved proposals to extend accommodation at Abernethy Trust's Abernethy Outdoor Centre in Nethy Bridge. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), after requesting additional information, said that capercaillie in the nearby Craigmores Woods Special Protection Area would not be affected by the extension plans.

CAIRNGORM TRAPS

The Scottish Farmer reported that Grampian Moorland Group has urged the public not to tamper with legally-set traps as they are worried that members of the public may be injured if traps are damaged.

A number of legal traps have been damaged close to a popular walking area on a grouse estate near Aboyne in the Cairngorms National Park. The traps are approved by SNH to be deployed by trained gamekeepers to control predators such as stoats and weasels. The gamekeepers said that 'legitimate moorland activities' were being hampered.



ENERGY

RENEWABLES

Scottish Renewables warned that the renewables industry, which currently provides nearly half of Scotland's electricity, will see further contraction unless the industry secures a 'viable framework for future investment.' Niall Stuart, of Scottish Renewables, said: "Last year saw the removal of – or significant reductions in – schemes to support investment, and no clear signal of how or if these will be replaced for many parts of the industry. Last year saw the lowest deployment of new renewable electricity generating capacity in Scotland since 2010, and as the second-worst year since 2007. We have seen many companies in the sector downsize their teams already, and I worry we are going to see further contraction."

According to Scottish Renewables, the decision to close the Renewable Obligation scheme early put £3 billion of investment in Scotland at risk; the sector was dealt a further blow by the UK government's move to end subsidies for new onshore wind projects. Scottish Renewables said that adding to the uncertainty are delays in implementing the Renewable Obligation's successor scheme, Contracts for Difference, under which companies looking to build renewable projects bid for the right to sell the power they generate.

Scottish Renewables said there is now no way Scotland would achieve its target of generating the equivalent of 100% of its gross annual electricity consumption by 2020.

- *The Independent* reported that, for the first time on record, wind turbines have generated more electricity than was used in the whole of Scotland on a single day.

An analysis for WWF Scotland found that unseasonably stormy weather saw turbines create about 106% of the total amount of electricity used by every home and business in the country on 7 August. Turbines produced 39,545 megawatts per hour (MWh) over 24 hours. Scotland's total electricity consumption for that day was 37,202MWh.

Lang Banks, of WWF Scotland, urged the Scottish Government to commit to a new target of supplying half of all Scotland's energy needs – including heat and transport – from renewables by 2030.

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "We have a clear policy for an energy mix to provide energy security for the future and will set out our ambitions for an integrated approach to low carbon technologies within our draft energy strategy later this year. This will include exploring the option of setting a new renewable energy target. Recent decisions taken at UK level have been damaging to key areas of the industry. Going forward we need both a long-term commitment and greater visibility on funding to provide certainty and confidence to developers and investors."

- Windfarm operators received a record-breaking £3.1m in constraint payments for turning off turbines on 7 August. Turbines were turned off to avoid overloading the National Grid. Firms will also get an additional £1m for electricity they were prevented from generating because it was not needed. 46,150 MWh were 'switched off.'

Lang Banks, of WWF Scotland, called for improvements to the National Grid by increasing its storage capacity together with improvements to the grid and stronger interconnectors.

WINDFARM UPDATES

Dumfries & Galloway: *The BBC News* website reported that Force 9 Energy and EDF Energy

Renewables appealed the rejection of the five turbine Blackwood windfarm near Auldgrith [May 16]. The developers argued that the council's approach had been 'unbalanced' and that 'limited environmental issues' had been given a 'disproportionate weight' in the local authority's assessment of the project. The Scottish Government ruled that the appeal was out of the three month time limit and could not be considered.

Scottish Borders: Gilston Hill Wind Farm Ltd plan to erect eight turbines near Heriot.

- Plans for LE20's windfarm near Grantshouse have been submitted. Eight turbines are planned for Howpark Farm. The site is adjacent to the 22 turbine Drone Hill windfarm and is south of Penmanshiel, which has consent for 14 turbines.

- A public local inquiry took place into the proposed Whitelaw Brae windfarm in the Tweedsmuir Hills. 2020 Renewables plans to build a windfarm beside the largest area of high ground in southeast Scotland.

SOLWAY OFFSHORE WIND

The *BBC News* website reported that a report by Glasgow and Cumbria universities suggests that the Robin Rigg windfarm, off the Solway Coast, has had little benefit for those living on the Scottish side of the estuary. The study found that the 60 turbine Robin Rigg windfarm had a mildly negative impact on fishing and funding benefits from the scheme had been negligible. The area is traditionally associated with fishing and also benefits from tourism.

Dr Darrell Smith from the University of Cumbria said there was also a general 'disappointment' among the local community about the perceived long-term benefits of the project for the region.

The report said that there was a case for more consideration to be given to the connection local people felt with a particular region when similar projects were planned in future.

LEWIS HYDRO

Eishken Ltd plans to build a pumped storage hydro scheme to store energy, principally generated by windfarms on the Isle of Lewis. It will also double the use of the Western Isles Link, the cable being installed by the National Grid to export and import electricity generated from renewable energy sources on the islands.

The Eishken scheme will use the sea as the 'second reservoir' in its design, with water extracted from and returned to the waters off the coast of Lewis. Using the sea as the lower reservoir is new to the UK. The design has a much lower environmental impact because it eliminates the need to construct two reservoirs and also makes the installation easier, cheaper and quicker to build.

The development will be located next to and incorporated into the already consented 162 MW Muaitheabhal Wind Farm [Oct 13], allowing some of the energy generated by the windfarm to be stored up until required, helping to balance out the unpredictable nature of wind energy.

TIDAL TURBINES

Two linked 100 KW turbines, installed by Nova Innovation in the Shetland Tidal Array at Bluemull Sound, are now delivering electricity to the National Grid. This is a world first from a tidal array.

- The SR2000 device, said to be the world's most powerful tidal turbine, is undergoing final checks before being connected to its mooring system at the European Marine Energy Centre (EMEC) test site. Scotrenewables Tidal Power

said that it will generate 2 MW of power.

The project has been supported by Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government via the Renewable Energy Investment Fund.

OIL & GAS

The Herald reported that the Oil & Gas Authority has awarded contracts worth more than £2.5m to Schlumberger WesternGeco and DownUnder Geosolutions to re-analyse examine archived seismic data of the UK continental shelf. Modern techniques will be able to pinpoint whether previously under-explored areas show signs of oil and gas deposits. Among the areas set to be re-examined are the East Shetland Platform, the Firth of Clyde, and the Minches.

A classification anomaly means that potential oilfields beneath the Firth of Clyde and the Minches would be considered 'onshore' and it would be a Scottish Government decision whether to approve them for exploration licences if the updated analysis showed strong evidence of gas and oil deposits.



TOURISM & RECREATION

WINDFARMS & TOURISM

Research, published by BiGGAR Economics, looked at 18 windfarm sites across Scotland and examined the number of people employed in tourism in the local area before and after they were developed. It found that some of the local authority areas with the greatest growth in tourism employment also saw the greatest rise in onshore wind installations.

Between 2009 and 2013, the level of employment in tourism in Scotland increased by almost 11% per cent during a time when the onshore wind sector in Scotland was growing rapidly. In the majority of areas studied, sustainable tourism employment performed better in areas surrounding windfarms than in the wider local authority area.

The report's findings undermine criticisms of windfarms for driving down tourism made by the Mountaineering Scotland, and others.

See: <http://bit.ly/2apzSKb>

Mountaineering Scotland refuted this report saying that major weaknesses in the study by BiGGAR Economics make it irrelevant to the debate over constructing windfarms in mountain areas and wild land.

Dr Dave Gordon, of Mountaineering Scotland, said that the BiGGAR report fails because it ignores the importance of location when measuring the effect of windfarms, and uses sample areas which could fail to show very real effects. Dr Gordon said: "This report assumes that all windfarms are equal and will have the same effect on tourism, but that's obviously not the case. You wouldn't expect windfarms to have any effect in areas where tourism is not dependent on landscape – and all the windfarms cited in this report are in such areas, with none having been objected to by Mountaineering Scotland. In areas where the landscape is a major factor in attracting tourism – such as mountain areas – our own surveys have shown that people are deterred by the presence of windfarms. However these areas are not included in the BiGGAR report."

Dr Gordon also highlighted a basic error in the design of the study. He said: "If you are going to test for any effect from windfarm construction, you need a baseline where there are no windfarms to allow a proper comparison. In at least five of the locations in the study there were operational windfarms already there, and in two more cases

there were windfarms under construction. That really is a fatal flaw. You can't have a valid before and after study without a proper baseline. The study did not show, as claimed, that 'Scottish windfarms have no effect on tourism jobs.' The best that could be claimed would be that Scottish windfarms in areas where the tourism market is less sensitive to landscape have no aggregate effect on tourism jobs. And in view of the other flaws in the study, even that cannot be said with any conviction."

WINDFARMS & MOUNTAINEERS

Mountaineering Scotland (MS) has published a report which quantifies, for the first time, the impact which windfarms located in mountain landscapes have on hill-walking and mountaineering behaviour. In a survey of members, 67% stated that they prefer not to see windfarms when in the mountains and 22% said that they avoided areas with windfarms when planning their activities. 2% said that they were encouraged to visit the mountains more often because of windfarms.

Mountaineering Scotland has published the report as part of the evidence base the organisation uses when opposing the small number of windfarm planning applications that it believes would cause irreparable damage to Scottish mountain landscapes if allowed to go ahead.

David Gibson, of MS, said: "This survey gives us some important evidence about the real impact windfarms in inappropriate mountain locations can have on the behaviour of hill walkers and potentially other mountain users – but the impact goes more widely than this. If hill walkers avoid visiting areas affected by wind development then local communities will lose the money hill walking visitors bring to shops, places to stay and other visitor-related businesses. A 20% reduction in hill walkers could easily make the difference between profit and loss for small enterprises in mountain areas across Scotland. Hill-walkers are likely to be particularly sensitive consumers of landscape. They are therefore a barometer in terms of identifying wider tourism impacts from windfarms.

"Mountain recreation is a significant tourism market in Scotland. Walking tourism was estimated to bring in £627m to the Scottish economy in 2008 – more than all other nature-based tourism combined – and 15% of all tourism spend. With more windfarms consented and due to be built and new applications for industrial-scale developments coming in all the time, we must not be complacent. Scotland's cherished mountain landscapes and wild land are at risk of being significantly diminished over time and this could have a major negative impact on local communities that rely on their visitor and tourist economy. How much future displacement there is will depend upon how well Scotland's mountains are protected by the planning system and Scottish ministers."

In a previous survey in 2013-14, 56% of members anticipated avoiding areas with windfarms in the future. In the last two years some major and potentially damaging windfarm proposals have failed to gain planning approval, in many cases due to concerns about their detrimental impact on wild land. However, it is also because the roll-out of consented windfarms has been very slow and many projects have not yet been constructed.

See: <http://bit.ly/2bFuXIX>

COUNTRY SPORTS

Rural economy secretary, Fergus Ewing, said that latest figures showed that tourism from field sports, such as shooting, stalking and fishing, contribute £155m to the Scottish economy. Forecasters predict revenue from rural sports will grow to around £185m by 2020.

• A survey of 33 grouse estates showed that they spent almost £7m on wages in 2015. The figures were collated from regional moorland groups in Angus, Grampian, Loch Ness, Tomatin, Tayside and Central Scotland, Speyside and the Lammermuirs.

GROUSE

Several estates have postponed, or cancelled, shooting this year as many of the early chicks did not survive the cool spring conditions. The grouse season runs from August 12 to December 10.

Alex Hogg, of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, said that the industry supported 8,800 full-time jobs per year in remote areas. He said: "Compared to many other European countries, Scotland does not have an embedded 'hunting' culture and chunks of the population don't know the impact the shooting seasons have to the country, economically. There are real concerns for employment in rural Scotland at the moment, particularly in oil and gas, so gamekeepers and their families want to see the industry grow. We want to work with the Scottish government to make sure hard working people can continue to rely on these posts in future."

• Dr Mark Avery has launched a petition against driven grouse shooting, which has now reached over the 100,000 signatures needed for the UK government to consider the subject for a debate.

See: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/125003>

GAMEBIRD LICENSE

A petition, calling for state regulated licensing of all gamebird hunting in Scotland, was lodged by the Scottish Raptor Study Group with the backing of RSPB Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The petition states that the gamebird-shooting industry in the UK is the least-regulated in comparison with other European countries and, arguably, is responsible for more environmental destruction than any of its European counterparts. The petition is calling for licensing rather than for a ban, and it is directed at all types of gamebird hunting in Scotland, including grouse, pheasant, and partridge, rather than just driven grouse shooting.

See: www.parliament.scot/GettingInvolved/Petitions/petitionPDF/PE01615.pdf

CAIRNGORM MOUNTAIN

In a letter to *The Herald*, Dave Morris, formerly of Ramblers Scotland, said that the ski slopes in the Cairngorms National Park have become a 'cesspit' and will continue to suffer environmental damage unless ministers act. He said that ownership of the ski area must be wrested from Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). CairnGormMountain Ltd operates the ski area and mountain railway, which is still owned by HIE.

He said: "Recent visits to the northern Cairngorms have revealed a landscape more like an abandoned quarry than a so-called premier ski resort. Why are there piles of construction debris, old chairlifts, cables and derelict buildings lying about? Some of it has been there for at least ten years beside Coire na Ciste car park."

PILGRIM WAY

Five Pilgrim Way long distance walking routes are under development in Scotland, with support from the Scottish Government, local authorities

and the Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum. They are the Deeside Way, Iona to St Andrews, Fife Pilgrim Way, the Whithorn Way, and Forth to Farnie. The forum is seeking £120,000 over the next five years to develop the routes.

COUL LINKS

The *Sunday Herald* reported that Bandon Hills Golf Resort is being planned for Coul Links, on the Dornoch Firth, near Embo in Sutherland. Mike Keiser and Todd Warnock, from the USA, have submitted an application notice to Highland Council and are preparing a detailed application, including an environmental impact statement, for 48 hectares on the Loch Fleet Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Coul is also part of Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds, is a Ramsar site and has rare moths, ants and flies.

Jonathan Hughes, of the Scottish Wildlife Trust, said: "Like Trump, Keiser has a track record of getting his own way whatever it takes and like Trump he seems to think protected area laws can be torn up for his own private financial gain. Allowing another sand dune SSSI to go the way of the benighted Trump development at Menie would be an unforgivable and tragic loss of a protected area."

Craig Macadam, of Buglife, said: "A golf course can be sited anywhere, but many of the species at Coul are completely reliant on these fragile habitats ... The presence of nationally scarce insects shows what a special place Coul is. A good example is the *Fonseca* seed-fly. It is a very modest little creature but is found practically nowhere else in the British Isles. Only special places provide a home for such scarce species. We have a duty to protect Coul Links and all its creatures, both great and small."

Stuart Housden, of RSPB Scotland, said: "A large part of the proposed golf course is within the Loch Fleet SSSI, and the Dornoch Firth & Loch Fleet SPA. The site is noted for important protected birds including terns, geese and waders. It fully deserves its protected status and I am very surprised that it should be under this kind of threat."

Deborah Long, of Plantlife Scotland, said: "Coul Links is a remarkable place for plants. One of the reasons for this is that the Links form a complete and undisturbed system of habitats running from the foredune to the slacks. Each habitat possesses its own specialised plant and insect communities. It is unusual to find such features surviving on the coast because the pressure for development over the years has caused massive losses. It would be a tragedy if, in 2016, we were to allow one of the few remaining sites of this type to be lost."

The four conservation charities have written to the developers, urging them to rethink their plans. They said that Scottish Natural Heritage considers that an Environmental Impact Assessment is likely to conclude there will be significant impacts on the environment, including loss of important coastal wetland habitat.

SWT requested a meeting with the developers of the golf course to find out more about the plans but they have declined.

See: www.notcoul.com; <http://bit.ly/2bxXiin>

NETHY BRIDGE PATH

The Cairngorms National Park Authority approved the building of an all-abilities bridge and 740 metre boardwalk path between Steel's Mill at Culvardie and the Tulloch Road in Dell Wood, Nethy Bridge. The project is led by the Nethy Bridge Community Council. The land is owned by SNH as part of the Abernethy Forest Nature Reserve, and Reidhaven Estate. 25 mature and semi-mature Scots pine will be felled for the project, and some birch removed; there will be compensatory planting.