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SCENES, an independent digest of environmental news in Scotland, was launched in 1987 by Dr James Fenton. Issues 49 to 161 were edited and published by Michael and Sue Scott. It is for anyone with an interest in the land and sea, whether professional or amateur. It is based solely on published material, and contains only news, with no editorial comment or opinion.

SCENES is published monthly, and comes out in the month following the title month.

NOTE: dates in square brackets relate to the most recent reference in *SCENES*.

WEBSITE: www.scenes.scot

DEADLINES: News releases and press cuttings for inclusion in *SCENES* are welcomed from organisations and individuals. Please post, or email, them to the address below, by the end of each month.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: The basic annual subscription is £50. Concessions are available for small firms and charities (£28), individuals, and outworkers with a main subscription (£22), students and seniors (£18) and for extra copies sent to the same address (£12).

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SCENES is edited and published by Sue Fenton: Polldoran, Clachan Seil, by Oban, Argyll PA34 4TJ

email: enquiries@scenes.scot

Printed by Printsmith Lochaber Ltd

ISSN 0955-226X



CONSERVATION

WILD LAND

Descriptions of Scotland's 42 Wild Land Areas have been published by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Wild Land Areas across Scotland were identified to support Scottish Planning Policy [Jun 14]. They are the most extensive areas where high wildness can be found and include remote mountains and moorland, isolated sections of coast and uninhabited islands. Based on field study and illustrated with photographs and maps, the descriptions, prepared by independent consultants, capture the special qualities of Scotland's wilder landscapes. They provide a baseline against which change affecting the qualities of Wild Land Areas can be assessed.

SNH is also inviting comments on draft guidance it has produced to help development interests and decision-makers when they are assessing potential impacts on Wild Land Areas.

Peter Hutchinson, of SNH, said: "The proposed guidance will help enable consistent assessment of the potential effect of any new development on the qualities of Wild Land Areas. It is technical guidance which complements established approaches to assessing the landscape and visual impacts of development. The Wild Land Descriptions provide a helpful reference against which changes to the Areas' qualities can be assessed. Assessing potential impacts on Wild Land Areas is a key stage of the development process. We hope that the descriptions of the Wild Land Areas and the associated guidance will support the planning and consenting processes and help to achieve the right developments in the right places."

Stuart Brooks, of the John Muir Trust, said: "We would applaud the work that SNH has carried out to create vivid and detailed descriptions of each individual wild land area, which examine landscape, ecology, geology, archaeology and current human activity. They will help bring to life Scotland's most beautiful, wild and remote places – turning lines on maps into real places."

The consultation runs until 7 April.

Assessing Impacts on Wild Land Areas – Technical Guidance replaces the existing guidance *Assessing the Impacts on Wild Land – Interim Guidance Note* published in 2007.

See: <http://bit.ly/2jVNNvY> (consultation) <http://bit.ly/2k5U0az> (descriptions); <http://bit.ly/2k7Yb6s> (technical guidance).

SWIFTS

The Herald reported that swifts have had a 52% decline in numbers over the past 20 years, although a good summer in 2014 contributed to a slight improvement in 2015. They are one of Scotland's fastest declining birds. The species decline has been attributed to a fall in suitable breeding spots in old, high buildings combined with other possible factors at their wintering grounds in Africa and along their migration routes.

MINK

Numbers of mink on Lewis and Harris have been reduced to a level where the population is no longer thought to be viable [Feb 14]. Six mink were caught in traps in 2016 and it is thought to be highly likely that no mink have bred in the Western

Isles for the first time since they escaped from fur farms in the 1960s. Iain Macleod said: "The work goes on to ensure that mink, which can have a devastating impact on our internationally renowned native animals and birds, are taken out of the equation." Since the removal of mink, Arctic terns have dispersed to numerous historically used colony sites and are breeding well. Gulls, ducks and divers are doing equally well, as well as dippers and waders. Water rail and moorhen have returned. The project has been granted additional funding by SNH to continue its work into spring 2018.

BLACK GROUSE

A paper, *Native Woodland Creation is Associated with Increase in a Black Grouse Lyrurus Tetrix Population*, has been published by authors from RSPB Scotland.

From 2002 to 2012, the number of lekking male black grouse increased by 90%. Lek occurrence was positively associated with the amount of new native woodland (NNW) edge habitat. Leks were larger where there was more adjacent NNW. Lek increases were greatest where NNW plots comprised approximately 30% land area, and were five years old, within a 1500 metre radius. Plots aged more than approximately 20 years old were associated with black grouse population declines. NNW supported taller and denser important field-layer vegetation than adjacent moorland, likely due to grazing exclusion. Expansion of native woodland could contribute to landscape-scale recovery of black grouse after decades of decline.

The paper was published online in *Bird Study* (Taylor & Francis online).

ORKNEY STOAT

SNH is investigating the sighting of a stoat on Sanday (Orkney) [Nov 15]. Since stoats were first recorded on Orkney in 2010, they have spread across the mainland and the connected isles. Any evidence of stoats on non-linked isles like Sanday is problematic: if allowed to colonise, the stoats will considerably increase the threat to Orkney's native wildlife, as well as increasing the costs and complexity of the project to remove them. SNH is working together with the Sanday ranger and RSPB Scotland to set up monitoring equipment and a localised trapping grid around the area where the potential stoat sighting was made.

PEATLAND ACTION

A further £8m has been awarded to the Peatland Action initiative, run since 2012 [May 16]. Peatland Action is one of the key projects helping to deliver the 2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity.

SNH will continue working with its Peatland Action partners to restore a further 8,000 hectares of peatland, to add to over 10,000 hectares already restored under the scheme. Peatland restoration involves blocking ditches, as well as other measures, to reduce the rapid runoff of water from the bare peat surfaces. More than 20% of Scotland is covered by peat; damaged peatlands can release their carbon into the atmosphere.

• The Peatland Action Project has been awarded the Chartered Institute of Ecology

& Environmental Management (CIEEM) Best Practice Award for Large Scale Practical Conservation.

See: peatlandaction@snh.gov.uk

WILDCAT

The charity, Wildcat Haven, is to create a new 1,500 square mile conservation zone in Caithness, where wildcats can be prevented from hybridisation [Apr 16]. The safe haven is part of a larger long term plan to link up Caithness and existing Ardnamurchan to create a ‘truly national’ safe haven for the species.

CORN BUNTINGS

SNH reported that the number of corn buntings has stabilised in Aberdeenshire and Moray. Corn buntings, farmland birds, are at high risk throughout the UK after dramatic population declines and range contractions and are red-listed.

Once widespread, the birds are now only found in four main areas of Scotland – Fife, Angus, the Western Isles and the stronghold of Aberdeenshire and Moray.

There was a slight increase in corn bunting numbers across the 48 farms surveyed, with 246 territorial males in 2015, compared with 232 in 2008–09. This is in sharp contrast with severe, long-term decline across Scotland in the 1970s to 2000s. The numbers are still lower than 20 years ago, however.

Allan Perkins, of RSPB Scotland, said: “The results of the survey are very encouraging, and a reflection of the many years of partnership working with farmers in these areas to improve the fortunes of this fantastic bird. Corn buntings favour farmland which is managed less intensively, especially late-cut meadows and weedy cereal fields, along with a rich source of seeds and grain during winter. Government funding is available for this type of management, and we encourage more farmers to participate to help restore corn bunting numbers to what they were in the 1990s.”

The report emphasises the importance of keeping up the momentum of agri-environmental schemes, as well as improving results by targeting measures to benefit corn buntings even further.

The current national population of corn buntings is estimated to be between 750 and 900 territorial males: this is 34 to 41% of the 2,200 estimated in 1993. The decline of corn buntings in Scotland and across much of Europe is mainly as a result of agricultural intensification.

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

 **FARMING**

AVIAN INFLUENZA

The Scottish Government has confirmed that the Avian Influenza Prevention Zone, announced in December, is to be extended until 28 February [Dec 16]. The H5N8 strain of Avian Influenza has been circulating in Europe. The zone applies to all poultry and captive birds in Scotland, and requires keepers to continue to keep their birds indoors, or take appropriate practical steps to keep them separate from wild birds. There is also a GB-wide ban on poultry shows and gatherings. Avian Influenza is a notifiable disease.

WESTERN ISLES GEESE

The final year of spring shooting is to take place on Lewis and Harris in order to reduce the greylag goose population [Jul 16]. Marksmen will shoot geese between 15 February and 15 April under licence, on land where permission from

the landowner and crofters has been granted. The target is for an additional 1,100 geese to be shot this spring.

The management pilot is now in its third year and has been developed by the local goose management group with support from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Scottish Government’s Rural Inspections & Payments Department. Sustainable land management is a priority project in Scotland’s 2020 Challenge for Biodiversity and controlling local populations of geese aims to balance agricultural and conservation interests.

This will be the final period of shooting under the current management pilot project. The progress on Lewis and Harris will be reviewed alongside results from the other pilot areas, once this year’s results and feedback from the participating communities is available. The local goose management group is actively exploring options to ensure the long-term sustainable management of greylag geese in Lewis and Harris once the pilot has finished.

There are currently no plans for continued funding from SNH or Scottish Government beyond the end of the pilot.

 **WOODLAND**

SHEEP & FORESTRY

New guidance will help Forest Enterprise Scotland (FE Scotland) staff work closely with farmers to manage stray sheep on the National Forest Estate. FE Scotland worked with Police Scotland and the Scottish Government to produce the guidance with the NFU Scotland, National Sheep Association and the Sheep Scab Industry Group.

There has been a particular problem with feral and stray sheep in the south of Scotland. Around 190 separate incidences were recorded, involving 1,500 animals in the Borders, Galloway and Dumfries areas. Unregulated movements of sheep in forests poses a biosecurity risk, specifically in terms of sheep scab and the transmission of tree diseases. Stray sheep can also browse on young trees. Robin Waddell, of FE Scotland, said that in the Galloway Forest Park alone, it was estimated £80,000 *per* year of damage was caused to young trees by stray sheep. He added the national cost was likely to be more than £250,000 *per* year.

The guidance for FE Scotland staff highlights the current policy, legal position, roles and responsibilities and options for tackling unmanaged sheep on the National Forest Estate.

NATIVE WOODLAND

A new analysis of the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (NWSS), undertaken by Forestry Commission Scotland and analysed by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), has been published in the journal, *Scottish Forestry*. The article, by Victor Clements, claims that 39,000 hectares of ancient woodlands, classed unsatisfactory due to exotic tree planting, were omitted from the survey, despite being assessed.

Mr Clements said: “An initial draft revealed an important sub-set of our native woodlands were not actually included in the main report though available for mapping purposes. When the Planted Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) area is added, it becomes apparent the greatest threat (to native woodlands) in terms of area, is actually non-native tree species, not herbivore impacts, although the order of magnitude is broadly the same. This means the narrative surrounding the launch of the report is not actually correct. Herbivore impacts are not the most significant issue affecting native

woodlands at all, although their effects are not denied in many cases. A more appropriate narrative would be that we have a number of issues impacting on native woodlands in Scotland, with non-native species and herbivore impacts being the most important, in almost equal measure.”

Adding the excluded woodlands to the survey would have meant the area impacted by exotic trees would have been 117,342 hectares compared to 112,383 grazed by sheep and deer.

The Native Woodland Survey had concluded that 54% of woods were in unsatisfactory condition, the principal cause being ‘excessive browsing and grazing’ mainly by deer which impacted 33% of the total.

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) called for an end to ‘tunnel vision’ claiming that all factors affecting woodland condition should be considered and not just deer. Alex Hogg, of SGA, said: “Even without the omitted 39,000 hectares, non-native trees impact 77,000 hectares of native woodland in Scotland. This won’t go away because it is one of the key criteria determining whether woodlands are satisfactory or not. If native woodlands are to meet 2020 Biodiversity targets, focusing on one issue, deer, won’t work in isolation. Something has to be done about the amount of exotic species such as Sitka spruce and other conifers on these sites, although this seems to be of little concern. At some point, a wider view has to be taken addressing all issues in the round.”

The Herald reported that an FC Scotland spokesman said: “We are always interested in new analyses of woodland data. It would be incorrect, as suggested in the postscript of the report, to use this data to amend the findings of the NWSS. Both data sets are complex and care should be taken when considering them together.”

ARGYLL WOODLANDS

The *Scottish Farming Leader* reported that the Argyll Small Woods Cooperative has received funding from LEADER to fund the first stage of a project to help small woodland owners in Argyll manage their woodlands. The project aims to promote innovative ways in which farm woodlands can be utilised sustainably. Initially, the extent of the small woodlands resource will be surveyed.

See: www.argyllsmallwoods.coop

 **FISHFARMING & FISHERIES**

FISHFARM LICENSING

The Sunday Herald reported that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) is to launch a public consultation on a new licensing framework for fishfarms. According to a recent submission it made to the Scottish Parliament on the government’s draft budget, this will include a plan to drop salmon biomass limits. SEPA said that the aim was to ensure that ‘the regulatory framework more closely matches the growth agenda pursued by the industry by removing imposition of a limit on biomass.’ This would enable operators ‘to increase biomass where environmental monitoring demonstrates that the location is able to cope.’ It would put responsibility for day-to-day management of sites into the hands of ‘responsible fishfarmers.’

The fishfarming industry recently announced a plan to double its business from £1.8 billion in 2016 to £3.6 billion by 2030 [Oct 16]. The plan was backed by the Scottish Government, which promised to set up an industry leadership group.

Philip Lymbery, of Compassion in World Farming, said that the proposed changes would benefit the industry but be ‘disastrous’ for fish. He

said: "Squeezing ever more fish into a set amount of space will have damaging effects on their well-being, with crowding leading to increased stress and potentially higher incidence of disease. Scrapping the limit on maximum biomass would be a seriously retrograde move which would have repercussions on the welfare of both farmed and wild fish. We should be reducing biomass. Until we find a humane and sustainable way of dealing with the sea-lice issue the industry should not be seeking to grow at all."

Don Staniford, from the Global Alliance Against Industrial Aquaculture (GAAIA), said: "SEPA is bending over backwards to accommodate the relentless expansion of salmon farming. Salmon farms, even at current capacity, are causing widespread benthic impacts [on organisms] with dead zones under cages. Increasing production will effectively wipe out whole swathes of the seabed. Removing what few controls there are in favour of unrestricted expansion is a recipe for ruin." He said that SEPA was 'cravenly kowtowing' to the industry and ignoring environmental concerns.

According to industry data, there have been 858 breaches of salmon biomass limits since 2002 at 170 fishfarms, amounting to over 74,000 tonnes. SEPA said that on average there had been five sites a month over the limit.

Guy Linley-Adams, of Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland, said that restricting the number of salmon in fishfarms provided wild fish a little protection against sea-lice. He said: "If the Scottish Government is to strip even that modicum of protection away, in this precipitous dash for growth at all costs, it is the wider environment that will suffer. It is simple maths. More fish on a farm means more lice on the farm and more lice leaving the farm to infect wild fish."

SEPA confirmed that the consultation proposals would include a biomass limit for fishfarms to start with. Stuart Baird, of SEPA, said: "If the results of seabed monitoring show that impacts from the fishfarm comply with seabed standards then the farmer will be able to increase the biomass held at that site incrementally. Increases above the fixed starting biomass will only be allowed where environmental monitoring demonstrates that it is safe to make such increases. At sites which fail to meet environmental standards, further stocking will not be permitted until conditions come back into compliance with seabed standards. This method will allow for growth but only where environmental monitoring shows the site is able to cope with this growth."

SEA-LICE

New Scottish Government rules on sea-lice come into force on 1 April. Any fishfarm found to have a sea-lice infestation above a certain threshold will then have to draw up an action plan in conjunction with the Fish Health Inspectorate.

It is estimated that one in five farms would fail the new tests. The annual losses due to sea-lice could be around £300m.

Don Staniford, of GAAIA, said: "Instead of allowing the industry to hide from public scrutiny, the Scottish Government should publish site specific sea-lice data as is already the case in Norway, Ireland and Canada. Salmon farms breaching sea-lice limits should be named and shamed and then closed down if non-compliance continues."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "We have worked cooperatively with the aquaculture industry to agree a new sea-lice management policy, which represents a significant step forward in regulatory control of sea-lice levels. We consider this change will result in

improvements to the management of sea-lice by the aquaculture industry in Scotland. It is the aim of both the Scottish Government and the Scottish aquaculture industry to manage sea-lice to the lowest achievable level. As with any new policy, this will be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that Scotland's legislative and regulatory framework continues to provide the right balance between sustainably growing aquaculture and protecting the environment."

- SEPA has published data which show that a total of 467kg of chemical compounds was used to control sea-lice in 2016, compared with 45kg in 2006, a 932% increase. Production rose by 35% over the same period.

ARGYLL FISHFARM

Kames Fish Farming Ltd has made an application to SEPA for a 12 cage fishfarm at Salen Mor bay, Dounie, in Argyll within the newly created Loch Sunart to Sound of Jura Marine Protected Area (MPA). CROMACH (Craignish Restoration of Marine & Coastal Habitats) objected to the proposal; it said that the area has a high concentration of existing fishfarms and it will be sited close to the currently very clean River Add estuary, an important wild salmon and trout river.

Campaigners, including wildlife tourism operators, said that the effluent (>5000 tonnes of faeces per year) is likely to impact on a Priority Marine Feature of the MPA and the main reason it was set up – the critically endangered common skate.

LOCH ETIVE

The *Oban Times* reported that Dawnfresh Farming Ltd has lost an appeal to the Scottish Government to use the shoreline of Loch Etive near Inverawe to maintain and store fishfarm equipment. Argyll & Bute Council refused planning consent in May 2016, as it considered that the site had not been already in use for the ten year period need to establish lawful use of the land. Dawnfresh appealed, saying that the site had been in use from 1974 to August 2015, when the site was cleared, not abandoned, and being dormant was capable of being revived.

Guy Linley-Jones, of Friends of Loch Etive, said that the group welcomed the government's ruling against littering the shore with industrial equipment. He said: "The council recognised the real risk of damaging the landscape of Loch Etive and the fragile tourist economy on which the Etive community so clearly depends."

RIVER GARRY

The River Garry, a tributary of the River Tummel, was harnessed for the production of hydro electricity in the 1930s, with further works completed in the 1950s. This resulted in the removal of most of the flow of the river, as well as some tributaries, leading to the loss of the river's salmon population. Ten miles of the River Garry, north of Blair Atholl in Perthshire, has been dry since the mid-1950s. SSE has confirmed that an initial breach has been made at the Struan Weir and that further engineering work will commence shortly to restore flows to the River Garry. It is estimated that this is likely to produce an additional 1,500 adult salmon returning to the river annually.

SOLWAY FIRTH

The *BBC News* website reported that Marine Scotland (MS) is to consider a compensation claim over new wild salmon protection rules on the Solway Firth [Apr 16]. A three year ban is in place on killing fish outside estuary limits with strict controls on numbers in inland waters.

The Annan Common Good Fund holds the rights to traditional fishing methods, such as haaf, poke and stake netting, in much of the area. It has worked up a £50,000 compensation bid to MS, which confirmed that it would consider the bid but said that it could only be done after compensation for coastal netting had been agreed.

The annual cost of applying the regulations in the area has been estimated at nearly £17,000 due to lost fish licence income.

SHELLFISH

Following a consultation, the Scottish Government will introduce landing controls intended to improve the sustainability and management of Scotland's crab and lobster fisheries. The minimum landing sizes for brown crab are to be increased from 130/140 mm to 150 mm carapace width (excluding Shetland); velvet crab from 65 mm to 70 mm carapace width and lobster from 87 mm to 90 mm carapace length on the west coast (excluding Solway Firth).

Additionally, the maximum landing size of female lobster will be decreased to 145 mm carapace length (excluding Orkney and Shetland), and the landing of berried (egg bearing) velvet crab will be prohibited.

The new conservation measures are expected to come into force later in the year. See: <http://bit.ly/2iNUUsW>

WHITEFISH STOCKS

The *Press & Journal* reported that a study from NAFC Marine Centre in Shetland, *Trends in Scottish Fish Stocks 2016*, showed that a majority of the key white fish stocks have grown in size in recent years. The study said that stocks of hake and plaice have seen 'very substantial' increases. Herring and mackerel stocks are also at relatively large sizes, despite some fluctuations in recent years.

The study draws on the most recently published data from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea.

Ian Napier, of NAFC, said: "The size of most white fish stocks have increased over the last decade, in some cases by substantial amounts. And the level of exploitation of most stocks has declined over the same period, again by substantial amounts in some cases. The size of the North Sea cod stock, for example, is now at a similar size to that in the 1960s, prior to the gadoid outbreak (when stocks of North Sea cod and other gadoids – notably whiting and haddock – rose tenfold). The plaice stock has increased fourfold and the hake stock almost tenfold over the last decade."

DISCARDS

WWF Scotland said that the fall in remote electronic monitoring on fishing boats compromises stock management. The number of Scottish boats carrying monitoring cameras has halved since the scheme was introduced and new species have now been added to the discard ban. Landing Obligations are being phased in over a number of years; by 2019, the disposal of all fish at sea will be banned. WWF said that the ban is being undermined because it is not being effectively policed. Fishermen have traditionally discarded unwanted fish because they carry a lower financial value but, if landed, would count against their quotas.

Scottish Government figures show there are now 15 boats carrying cameras; there were 32 when the scheme was first introduced in 2014. Until this year, skippers were allowed an additional quota for North Sea cod if they agreed to install the camera equipment but that incentive has ended although quota incentives for other species still exist. By 2019, the disposal of all fish at sea will be banned.

Helen McLachlan, of WWF Scotland, said: "WWF is supportive of the Landing Obligation because if implemented effectively it offers clear opportunities, the most obvious of which is healthier fish stocks and a more resilient, profitable industry as a result. However with North Sea cod and whiting coming under the discard ban at the start of 2017, we have significant concerns about the levels of monitoring and control of the ban. For this policy to work we need to be confident we know what is happening at sea and how much fish is being removed. Yet on average it appears that less than 1% of fishing trips are being monitored."

Bertie Armstrong, of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, said: "Everybody's on the same side with reducing discards as far as physically possible it's just a question of getting the rules right which is a work in progress. Cameras, frankly, are a little side show and the presence of absence of them will not solve or fail to solve the problem."



MARINE

CROMARTY FIRTH

The Cromarty Firth Port Authority (CFPA) has been directed by the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) to withdraw its 2015 application for ship-to-ship (STS) transfers at the mouth of the Cromarty Firth [Dec 16]. CFPA will have to prepare a new application if it wants to continue with the project and must conduct a wide ranging consultation of all interested parties if applying again. CFPA said that it had already refined its application, and was confident that the changes made would reassure people.

Bob Buskie, of the CFPA, said: "Asking us to withdraw and resubmit our application is standard protocol in this scenario. It is nothing we weren't expecting when we committed to undertaking further public consultation. We will be following the standing application protocol, as directed by the MCA. This detailed package of work [to refine the application] is now complete and we will submit our refined application on schedule. We are confident the refined application answers the questions raised and will reassure our stakeholders that we can continue to undertake these operations safely."

CFPA said that ship-to-ship transfers would help its development plans and that it was aware of the need for it to protect the environment. A spokesman said: "We believe that people have the right to protest, and it is only fair that our stakeholders are confident we look after their environment. The port has modified its application in response to the concerns raised over the past 12 months. We fully appreciate that the environment in which we operate is extremely special, and we are legally bound to protect it."

The spokesman added that ship-to-ship oil transfers have taken place safely in the nearby Cromarty Firth for more than 30 years. He said: "More than 175 million barrels of oil have been transferred safely in the firth in that time, with no spills. We have the trained staff, necessary facilities and contingency plans in place to ensure these activities continue to be undertaken safely."

Dr Greg Fullarton, a spokesman for campaign group Cromarty Rising, said: "Given that 25 community councils surrounding the firth oppose this application, nearly 20,000 have signed a petition, and another petition is making its way through the Scottish Parliament we consider that the CFPA should listen to their stakeholders who are telling them loud and clear that they do not want STS at sea. If the CFPA choose to continue to ignore the communities surrounding

the Moray Firth, then we have no choice but to call for the resignation of the chairman and chief executive."

• Gail Ross MSP and Kate Forbes MSP have both voiced their opposition to CFPA's plans to transfer oil. They believe that the CFPA's original application had inadequate information in its environmental impact assessment. Campaigners against the scheme held a demonstration outside Holyrood.

First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, was questioned on the issue by Ms Ross during First Minister's Questions. Ms Sturgeon replied: "On the basis of the current information, the Scottish Government is unconvinced that ship-to-ship oil transfers can or should take place at anchor in the Cromarty Firth without resulting in an unacceptable risk to the marine environment, in particular a European designated area for bottlenose dolphin. We will ensure that the concerns of local communities are heard by the UK authorities while continuing to press for the relevant powers to be devolved to Scotland. We will continue also to support the Cromarty Firth Port Authority, which is a vital and valued part of the economy of the north of Scotland. The MCA, in my view, has a duty to listen to these concerns and to the local people."

Mark Ruskell MSP said: "While the decision to licence the application ultimately rests with the MCA, Scottish ministers have clear legal powers to protect the environment and the environmental importance of the Moray Firth couldn't be clearer. They need to put their foot down and show whose side they are on."

ORCA STRANDING

An adult orca (killer whale) was washed up on a beach at Linga in Shetland. Tests are being undertaken to confirm its identity from photographic records, and the cause of death. It may be one of the eight west coast orcas, or may be from an Icelandic pod [Jan 16].

HUMPBACK WHALES

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that a humpback whale was observed in East Loch Roag near Callanish, Lewis. Humpback sightings have been on the increase in the last two years, and this year alone has seen reports coming in from Shetland, Burghead (Moray) and the Forth of Firth. The rise in numbers might be due to a mix of a rising population as a result of the ban on hunting in 1986, growing fish stocks on fish species such as sprats and herring and possibly a greater awareness of how to report such sightings.



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

WILDLIFE CRIME

The Scottish Parliament's Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform (ECCLR) committee heard evidence about the Scottish Government's recent annual wildlife crime report [Nov 16]. In the past, this committee has only taken evidence from Police Scotland, the Crown Office, and the Minister for the Environment. This year evidence was heard from a wider range of stakeholders including Scottish Badgers, Scottish Gamekeepers' Association, RSPB Scotland and the Bat Conservation Trust.

Scottish Badgers claimed that the criminal practice of badger baiting is on the rise and warned that the police were slow to launch an investigation as there are not enough specialist wildlife officers. Not enough is being done to prosecute cases. Scottish Badgers said that it was

highly significant that in recent years none of the cases it had been involved in have progressed to the procurator fiscal.

Scottish Badgers said that the crimes are being under-recorded by the police. It identified 134 offences between 2012 and 2015, while only three people were prosecuted from 12 offences investigated. The written evidence said:

"[Scottish Badgers] come across many instances of disturbance to badger setts, and this is one reason the figures quoted in the government's report cause us concern. The report seems to suggest that badger crime hardly occurs in Scotland. The very small single figure numbers in the tables... do not reflect the many instances of disturbed setts and other incidents that we and members of the public come across."

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog reported that Scottish Badgers recorded 42 crimes against badgers in 2015, with Police Scotland recording five. Police Scotland has been asked to provide a written explanation of this discrepancy to the committee. Police Scotland has recently set up some new reporting mechanisms with Scottish Badgers, as well as training days for officers.

Police Scotland acknowledged that the full extent of wildlife crime in Scotland is an 'unknown' and recognised that the scientific/academic evidence of the effect of persecution on the distribution and abundance of raptor populations was a 'strong part' of the evidence of wildlife crime. However, none of this scientific evidence had appeared in the government's 2015 annual report. Mark Ruskell MSP asked what progress had been made in assessing this evidence, something that Police Scotland had committed to doing last year. The Police Scotland representatives said they'd be happy to look at the scientific evidence 'if it was brought to their attention.'

A Crown Office spokesman said consideration is given to any reports of alleged criminal conduct which are submitted by the police, or any specialist reporting agency, to the procurator fiscal and proceedings raised if there was sufficient evidence.

Mr Ruskell asked Police Scotland why some raptor crimes, that had been recorded by RSPB Scotland, had been excluded from the government's report [Nov 16]. He went on to give specific details about the crimes in question but the Police Scotland representative said that he didn't know about these specific crimes, eventually committing to finding out about them and giving assurance that he would later write to the ECCLR committee to explain why these data had been withheld from the government's report. According to RSPB Scotland, the above offences were uncovered during a Police Scotland-led multi-agency raid on an estate near Heriot in the Borders.

The *Herald* reported that Ian Thomson, of RSPB Scotland, said that there had been 'year-on-year improvements' in the annual report, which now contains a greater level of information and more clarity. However, he said: "What we are dealing with is only a proportion of what is actually going on, *ie* the tip of the iceberg."

Mr Thomson highlighted a case where a man was seen shooting two buzzards but 11 more were found hidden down rabbit holes in a follow-up search by police. He said: "There are numerous cases where evidence is found concealed or partially concealed."

He also cited a study undertaken in the north of Scotland which showed 41 red kites had been found illegally poisoned, but population modelling indicated this only represented a quarter of what the actual number of poisoned birds would/should have been. He said that there was a 'colossal problem' that is not being identified.

Peter Charleston, of the Bat Conservation Trust, agreed that the report did not present the full picture on wildlife crimes. He said: "We are aware of a number of investigations undertaken by Police Scotland, none of which resulted in crimes being recorded. We have no difficulty with that. The problem as far as we are concerned with reporting on crimes rather than incidents is that for bat persecution or bat crime there are many opportunities to prevent crime, probably more so than in most areas of wildlife crime."

He said that excellent preventative work is undertaken and the extent of that work does not feature in the report.

GAMEBIRD LICENSING

The ECCLR Committee considered how to progress the Scottish Raptor Study Group (SRSG)'s petition calling for the introduction of a state-regulated licensing system for all gamebird hunting in Scotland. The petition was submitted to the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee last summer. That committee took evidence from the SRSG and RSPB Scotland [Oct 16] and then evidence from the Scottish Moorland Group and BASC before deciding to pass the petition on to the ECCLR Committee for further consideration [Dec 16].

The ECCLR committee decided to write to the Environment Cabinet Secretary to ask when the (overdue) gamebird licensing review will be published, and to suggest that it be made available as soon as possible so that deliberations may be continued without further delay. It was suggested that the committee would like to be in a position to proceed by March.

The committee is also to write to the Environment Cabinet Secretary asking for her opinion on the effectiveness of other measures such as vicarious liability, general licences *etc.* After receipt of the gamebird licensing review, and following a short period of time to consider its findings, the committee will potentially invite the petitioner (Logan Steele of SRSG) and a range of stakeholders to give further evidence.

CAPE WRATH

The Scottish Land Fund has awarded £22,500 to Durness Development Group for a business plan and feasibility study for buying 111 acres of Cape Wrath in Sutherland [Dec 15]. The development group has six months to submit its scheme for the only land at the Cape not owned by the Ministry of Defence.

CROWN ESTATE

The Scottish Government is consulting on how the Crown Estate should be run. Both the management of the Crown Estate and the revenues generated in Scotland are being transferred as part of the changes in the 2016 Scotland Act [Dec 16]. The Crown Estate in Scotland includes a diverse portfolio of property, rights and interests that influence many aspects of rural and coastal life.

The consultation, *Long Term Management of the Crown Estate in Scotland*, says that there is a basic question about whether the estate should continue being managed on a primarily commercial basis or whether wider considerations, such as community benefits, could be taken into account when decisions are made.

Roseanna Cunningham, the Environment Secretary, said: "Control over the management and resources of the Crown Estate in Scotland should rest with the people of Scotland and this is a genuine opportunity to change the fabric of Scottish society. This consultation is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help shape the future management of the Crown Estate in Scotland. I would encourage all those interested to respond

to the consultation and help us to assume our new powers in a way which creates solutions which meet Scotland's needs and interests."

Crown Estate Scotland, an interim management body, is being set up as a public corporation to take on the management of the Crown Estate from April 2017. The Scottish Parliament could potentially then consider a Bill on the Crown Estate during 2019, which could then come into force from 2019/20.

The consultation on the proposals will run until 29 March. See: <http://bit.ly/2iLMOAq>

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Scottish Government has published its draft Climate Change Plan, which details proposals to achieve a 66% reduction in Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions by 2032 and demonstrates 'a new level of ambition' to build a low carbon economy.

Scotland has already exceeded its 2020 climate change target by achieving a 42% reduction in emissions six years early.

The draft plan sets out that by 2032:

- Scotland will have a fully decarbonised electricity sector able to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere
- 80% of domestic heat will be provided by low carbon heat technologies
- The proportion of ultra-low emission new cars and vans registered in Scotland annually will reach at least 40%
- 250,000 hectares of degraded peatlands will be restored (against 1990 levels)
- The annual woodland creation target will be increased to at least 15,000 hectares *per year*.

The *BBC News* website reported that Maurice Golden MSP said: "While it's welcome that we've made progress in reducing emissions in other sectors, the damage being caused by transport is still similar to the levels that we saw decades ago."

He also asked what the expected overall cost of the plan was. Ms Cunningham said the cost comes in at about 2% of GDP, noting that this does not take into account the huge benefits that will pay back from the scheme.

Mark Ruskell MSP said that ministers were not listening to expert advice from the UK Committee on Climate Change, noting that action on only half of a set of recommendations from the group appeared in the plan. He said: "On transport, the draft budget shows a massive rise in spending in motorways to almost £1bn, while funding for walking and cycling remains static at £39m. And if ministers are serious about cutting transport emissions, they cannot justify cutting Air Passenger Duty."

Liam McArthur MSP said: "Having only met our climate change targets once in five years we need a plan and a vision, backed by real financial muscle, that ensures we walk the talk on emissions reduction. In particular, we need to up our game in the areas of heat and transport, where progress to date has been slow or non-existent."

Tom Ballantine, of Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, said: "Much of what was set out in [the] plan is still at the pilot or consultation stage, and effort will now need to go into rapidly developing these into concrete policies. The urgency could not be clearer with this draft plan published straight after news that 2016 was the hottest year on record. With the threat from climate change increasing and affecting the lives of people here in Scotland and around the world, it's time to shift up a gear."

Four Holyrood committees, Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform; Rural Economy

& Connectivity; Local Government and the Economy have issued a call for views on the plans, known as RPP3.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) welcomed the government's commitment to funding for peatland restoration targets but believes that the targets should be higher and would like to see a discrete budget line for peatland restoration. SWT called for a commitment to planting a diverse range of tree species, including 90% native trees. It said that the technical measures to reduce emissions from agriculture but would like to see some of these go further, particularly in relation to soil quality. Deer management and deer density reduction as a tool for preventing erosion of upland soils and peat should have been included.

SWT would also like to see a commitment to a significant reduction in the density of grazing by deer and sheep to encourage widespread recovery of montane scrub and woodland, in order to improve natural carbon capture and storage, as well as providing many other benefits. Likewise a reduction in the extent and intensity of burning on driven grouse moors, as part of a licensing regime. SWT urges the inclusion of 'blue carbon' in the plan through restoration of marine habitats as part of the network of Marine Protected Areas.

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

UOG

The Scottish Government has begun a public consultation on the future of unconventional oil and gas (UOG) in Scotland. This includes hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and coal bed methane extraction [Nov 16]. A moratorium on UOG, which includes hydraulic fracking, has been in place since January 2015.

A dedicated website, www.talkingfracking.scot, has been created for the duration of the consultation that will provide information on unconventional oil and gas and the findings of the research commissioned by the Scottish Government.

Minister for Business, Innovation & Energy, Paul Wheelhouse, said: "The debate on the future of unconventional oil and gas in Scotland has proven both complex and controversial. It is also an issue that has stimulated intense discussion, motivated by deeply held and sincere views on all sides. The Scottish Government has sought to present impartial, independent information on unconventional oil and gas in order to encourage informed dialogue and debate. This consultation does not set out or advocate a preferred Scottish Government position or policy. Instead, we want to create space for dialogue and allow different perspectives to come forward."

"As most of Scotland's unconventional oil and gas deposits occur in and around former coalfields and oil shale fields in Scotland's Central Belt, which contains some of the most densely populated areas of the country, as well as in the area around Canonbie, Dumfriesshire, it is vitally important that communities, businesses and interest groups from across Scotland have an opportunity to put their views across."

Responses to the consultation will be independently analysed. MSPs will be asked to vote on the recommendation. A decision will be made by the end of 2017 on whether or not unconventional oil and gas has a role in Scotland's energy mix."

Lang Banks, of WWF Scotland, said: "Any decision to access more fossil fuel reserves by using fracking would fly in the face of the Scottish Government's much welcomed ambition of securing half of all of Scotland's energy needs from renewables by 2030."

Mary Church, of Friends of the Earth Scotland, said: "No state has had a moratorium on fracking,

looked at the evidence, and decided it's a good idea. Support for fracking is at an all-time low. People just don't want this dirty, dangerous industry."

Claudia Beamish MSP, who has introduced her own Member's Bill to ban fracking in Scotland, said that the government is further prolonging making a decision on whether to impose a ban.

Mark Ruskell MSP said: "The evidence to ban fracking already exists because we have more fossil fuels than we can burn if we want to limit climate change. A ban on fracking will allow us to focus on stable jobs in energy efficiency and renewables, and it's vital that communities take part in the consultation to make their feelings known because this could be the beginning of the end for fracking in Scotland."

The consultation will run until 31 May. See: <http://consult.scotland.gov.uk>



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

LANDSCAPES

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has published two documents which show the value of joint working between the natural and historic environment sectors to improve the understanding and care of Scotland's landscapes, a holistic and collaborative approach.

The first is a statement from the Scottish Historic Environment Forum (SHEF) on a shared vision for landscape and the historic environment. SHEF provides leadership to realise the shared vision for the historic environment as outlined in *Our Place in Time*, the historic environment strategy for Scotland. It is chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism & External Affairs, and includes Historic Environment Scotland (HES), National Trust for Scotland, SNH and Scottish Land & Estates.

The second document is a consultation on revised guidance on local landscape designations. This planning tool can help communities identify and celebrate landscapes which are especially valued locally. Councils use these when preparing local development plans to ensure special qualities are safeguarded and enjoyed by the community.

SNH and the former Historic Scotland first produced guidance on local landscape designations for local authorities in 2006. The consultation concludes on 3 March. See: <http://bit.ly/2hXbq9A>

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

A conservation study, commissioned by Culture Secretary, Fiona Hyslop, has said that 89% of 352 heritage sites managed by HES are exposed to damaging environmental effects attributed to climate change and extreme weather, which act as a multiplier to their natural deterioration. 53% were thought to remain 'at risk' from hazards such as flooding and erosion, with 28 sites classified as very high risk and 160 as high risk.

HES warned of resource challenges as it estimated that investment of £65m would be needed over the next ten years to ensure the satisfactory condition of its properties, with an extra £2.1m needed each year thereafter to sustain that condition.

GENERAL LICENCES

The judicial review of SNH's decision to impose a General Licence restriction order on Raeshaw Estate has taken place [Apr 16]. SNH imposed the General Licence restriction on the grouse moor estate, near Heriot in the Scottish Borders, in November 2015. The restriction was implemented

due to alleged raptor persecution incidents reportedly taking place on the estate; nobody has been charged with any criminal offence and the estate has denied any responsibility.

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog reported that this is an important test case with potentially far-reaching consequences. If the court decides that SNH acted fairly, then presumably SNH will get on with issuing other General Licence restrictions to other estates where Police Scotland has evidence of raptor persecution incidents having taken place since 1 January 2014.

If the court decides that SNH acted unfairly in imposing a General Licence restriction, then either the process for implementing a General Licence restriction will have to be revised or the scheme abandoned altogether [Dec 16]. The Scottish Government often points to the use of General Licence restrictions as an indication of its commitment to addressing raptor persecution.

PLANNING CONSULTATION

The Scottish Government has launched a consultation concerning modernisation of the planning system. The consultation proposes removing the need to apply for planning permission from a wider range of developments in order to 'simplify, streamline and clarify' the system. Developments that could be exempted include digital telecommunications infrastructure, renewable heat installations, cycle networks, polytunnels and allotments. Ministers believe that more review decisions should be made by councils rather than centrally and propose expanding the range of applications that are subject to local review. It is proposed to give communities more of a say in local planning.

The Herald reported that Clare Symonds, of Planning Democracy, said: "The consultation's commitment to improving people's trust and involvement in the system are welcome. People across Scotland made their voice clear in last year's consultation on planning – developers have more power than communities and that has to change. We believe it's time ministers supported an equal right of appeal like that enjoyed by people in Ireland."

The consultation runs until 4 April. See: <http://bit.ly/2j7aAH6>

STAFFIN HOUSING

The Staffin Community Trust has proposed six new houses for Staffin on Skye [Dec 16]. The plans are supported by crofting tenants, the Scottish Government (the landlord), the community council, the Crofting Commission and the Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association. However, SNH objected to the plans.

The West Highland Free Press reported that Steve North, of SNH said: "We recognise the need for more housing for the community but we don't feel this is the right place for development. We believe that the proposed development would affect the special scenery in this area; the Trotternish area, which includes Staffin, is designated by ministers as a National Scenic Area (NSA) because of its exceptional landscape. This landscape is a key economic asset for the island. There are other potential areas for housing which wouldn't affect the NSA ... Our role is to advise the Local Planning Authority on the landscape implications of proposed development. On rare occasions, we may formally object.

"However, the Planning Authority may conclude that other benefits outweigh the landscape concerns and decide to approve development. If so, our objection ensures that ministers are made aware of this intention. Scottish ministers have recognised the Trotternish landscape as being of national importance and

this includes the distinctive crofting settlement pattern at Staffin.

"SNH recognises that the landscape implications of development are one of the many issues that need to be considered by the Planning Authority."

The NSA designation has existed in Staffin for 40 years, but the local community now think that the classification is working against the local community and restricting development.

David Stewart MSP lodged a parliamentary question asking the Scottish Government what plans it had to review NSAs in the Highlands & Islands. He said that he was not against the designations *per se*, but felt that they were sometimes an impediment to development; there needs to be a balance between the aspirations of a remote, rural community and the need to protect the environment.

LOCH LOMOND PARK

A planning application by Rural Stirling Housing Association, for a development of 22 'affordable' houses' on a five acre woodland site near Balmaha, has been lodged with the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park Authority.

The park authority recently published its Local Development Plan which included an annual target to deliver 75 new homes across the area 'to sustain communities and meet demand for smaller, more modest-sized and affordable homes for young people, families and older people' [Dec 16].

Professor Dino Jaroszynski, of Balmaha Biodiversity Community Action, said: "The ancient woodland in Balmaha is extremely valuable, not just as one of the jewels in the crown of the West Highland Way, but as a genuine environmental concern. We're planning to protect this area with a giant biodiversity project, similar to that in Ben Lawers. Several rare and protected species can be found on the land; otters nest there as do red squirrel, we have a healthy colony of endangered slow-worms – all of which are protected ... If you start building houses on greenbelt land on the shore of Loch Lomond, you set a precedent and open the door to several similar developments. It inconceivable that this could happen, never mind in heart of one of Scotland's most well-visited National Parks."

A local resident, writing to the letters page of *The Herald*, said that the proposed site is on the Balmaha Plantation. Forestry Commission (FC) Scotland released the land for affordable housing. The plantation was agricultural land attached to Auchingyle Farm until bought by FC Scotland in the 1950s, when it was planted with birch trees in order to provide a quick hardwood crop. SNH has carried out an otter survey and found no evidence.

James Fraser, of the Friends of Loch Lomond & the Trossachs, also writing to *The Herald*, said that a large number of trees on the wider plantation site will remain. The site has been earmarked in the plan for affordable housing, and there has been 'extensive community consultation' over a number of years. The proposed development is some distance away from the West Highland Way.

GLEN ETIVE

Mountaineering Scotland called on The Highland Council to reject EE's planning application to site a phone mast adjacent at the roadside in Glen Etive, at a prominent corner near the southern end of Buachaille Etive Mor. Mountaineering Scotland objected, arguing that the mast – and two others being considered for the glen – would be visually intrusive. The site is within the Ben Nevis & Glencoe NSA.

In its objection, submitted to The Highland Council, Mountaineering Scotland argues that an otherwise largely unspoilt landscape and visitor experience would be compromised. It pointed out that SNH suggested that a number of alternative

locations within the glen could be used which would use the backdrop of the hills to make the visual impact less severe.

EE has subsequently withdrawn the proposals in order to review the number and siting of masts in Glen Etive. The company has offered to meet with Mountaineering Scotland and other organisations to discuss the way ahead.

HARE COURISING

The *BBC News* website reported that three men have been arrested in connection with alleged hare coursing near Lauder in the Scottish Borders. A number of hares were killed.

CUMNOCK

The *Sunday Herald* reported that regeneration proposals have been put forward by the Scotland's Towns Partnership, to make Cumnock a carbon neutral town. Backing has been received from the Scottish Government, East Ayrshire Council, Scottish Power and BT. The plans include proposals for a community-run renewable energy system, based on sun, wind and water power, and to make use of digital and smart technologies.

BEAULY/DENNY LINE

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that the final steel towers between Boat of Garten and Kingussie, replaced by the Beaully/Denny upgraded electricity transmission line, are being removed [Dec 15]. The work is being undertaken during the winter to minimise the disruption to breeding birds, particularly capercaillie and osprey.

Murray Ferguson, of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, said: "The removal of these final pylons will greatly enhance the views and general experience for everyone in this area of the national park, particularly along the recently extended Speyside Way. We will continue to monitor the effects of the restoration of the tracks and groundworks for the pylon line ..."

AIR POLLUTION

Friends of the Earth (FoE) Scotland has analysed government air pollution monitoring figures for 2016. It found that there are now 38 zones where safety standards for air quality are regularly broken. Scotland's 'most polluted' street was Hope Street in Glasgow.

Five new pollution zones, air quality management areas, were identified by Scottish local authorities in 2016 which include Salamander Street in Edinburgh, Johnstone and Renfrew in Renfrewshire, and in Linlithgow and Newton in West Lothian.

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said: "Our work on air pollution also includes a range of transport initiatives which are already in place, for example creating one of the most comprehensive electric vehicle charging networks in Europe with more than 1,200 charging bays, an interest free loan scheme to support low emission vehicle ownership, and a £14.5m Green Bus Fund, which has seen the introduction of 300 low emission buses to the Scottish fleet. In addition, our Cleaner Air for Scotland strategy sets out an ambitious programme of action to promote air quality. Scotland is the first country in Europe to adopt in legislation the WHO guideline value for particulate matter 2.5 – a pollutant of special concern for human health."

The European Ambient Air Quality directive limits nitrogen dioxide to 40 micrograms per cubic metre. The Scottish air quality objective for particles (PM10) is 18 micrograms per cubic metre. Both limits came into force in 2010.

The *Sunday Herald* reported that Alan Andrews, of ClientEarth, said: "The Scottish Government

has a duty to ensure that people in Scotland can breathe clean air. If the Scottish Government fails to take action it will be failing in its legal duty to protect the people of Scotland and will leave itself wide open to legal challenges in the Scottish courts."

Friends of the Earth Scotland accused the Scottish Government of failing to tackle the public health crisis caused by air pollution. Councils will be reluctant to introduce low emission zones unless they know there will be funding to help set them up.

Bailie Elaine McDougall, of Glasgow City Council, said: "The powers to implement or enforce the most significant measures to address air quality – for example fuel taxes, minimum engine standards and the power to regulate buses – are not held by local authorities."

Councillor Neil Cooney, of Aberdeen City Council, predicted that pollution would continue to fall when the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route opened. He said: "Local authorities are awaiting guidance on the national low emission framework which will prescribe the methodology authorities should follow to predict future pollution levels and the requirement for low emission zones and other measures to further improve air quality."

- Ministers have confirmed plans to pilot Scotland's first Low Emission Zone (LEZ) in 2018; it is not yet known which local authority will be involved but Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh councils have recently conducted feasibility studies into LEZs. The draft climate change bill aims to cut car emissions by 33% by 2032. The pilot LEZ would 'limit the access of vehicles that exceed emissions benchmarks while permitting unrestricted access for clean buses, vans and cars as well as smaller goods vehicles.'

See: www.scottishairquality.co.uk



ENERGY

ENERGY STRATEGY

The draft Scottish Energy Strategy has been published and sets out a vision for 2050 for Scotland to have a modern, integrated energy system that delivers reliable, low carbon energy at affordable prices to consumers in all parts of Scotland. A new target was set to deliver the equivalent of 50% of the energy required for Scotland's heat, transport and electricity needs from renewable sources by 2030.

The draft strategy seeks views on the future of onshore wind development in Scotland; innovation in offshore wind, including floating wind; Scottish Government support of the full range of renewable electricity generation technologies to both meet domestic electricity demand and to provide economic opportunities for Scotland and opportunities for communities to invest; the importance of security of supply, grid investment and the role for large-scale storage, such as pumped hydro storage; the development and use of emerging energy sources and technologies – like hydrogen, for the provision of transport, moving away from petrol; a renewed focus on energy efficiency and district heating; delivery of smart local energy systems, overcoming grid constraints and providing local solutions to local needs; establishment of a Scottish Government owned energy company and its potential remit in meeting Scotland's energy needs; and the potential role for renewable energy bonds.

The minister for Business, Innovation & Energy, Paul Wheelhouse, said: "The Scottish Government is determined to support a stable, managed transition to a low carbon economy

in Scotland, recognising the very real need to decarbonise our heat supplies and transport system. The oil and gas sector will continue to play a vital role during that transition, because our economy will continue to require hydrocarbons over this period."

Rebecca Bell, of RSPB Scotland, said: "We strongly support the development of renewable energy, but renewable energy generating technologies need to be sited in the right place so that they don't harm our most special species and habitats. To make this happen, we need strong leadership from government to direct development to the best sites, invest in understanding environmental impacts, particularly in our seas, and to promote low carbon, nature-friendly innovation. There are particular challenges with offshore wind because of the international importance of Scotland's marine wildlife, but our research has suggested that there may be huge potential for floating wind turbines far offshore – if there is investment in research on the environmental impacts, and support to bring the technology to commercialisation. We hope to work with government and developers to ensure that Scotland takes the lead in this area without harming wildlife."

The consultation will run until 30 May. See: <http://bit.ly/2jNvGlu>

FUTURE ENERGY

Scotland's Future Energy Taskforce, convened by WWF Scotland, has published a new strategy which suggests how the energy sector could be de-carbonised. It says that urban locations should be identified for the phased introduction of a ban on conventionally-fuelled vehicles from 2025. All homes should be renovated to a minimum 'C' energy performance rating by 2025 through incentives and standards which build on successful existing schemes.

RENEWABLES

Analysis by WWF Scotland of official government data has found that the average 'climate change impact' of generating a unit of electricity in Scotland is now half of the UK average. Measured by the amount of CO₂ released, it has fallen by 38% between 2010 and 2014, the most recent years for which figures are available; the UK saw a reduction of 12% over the same period. In 2014, the climate change impact of generating a unit of electricity in Scotland was 196g of CO₂ per kWh, compared with 400g of CO₂ per kWh in the rest of the UK.

WWF and others are now calling on the Scottish Government to now aim to repeat this significant achievement across the other areas of large scale energy consumption.

Fabrice Leveque, of WWF Scotland, said: "Electricity accounts for just one quarter of our energy use, so if we're to meet our future climate targets, the Scottish Government must build on the progress made in the electricity sector to set a 50% renewables target for all our energy needs, across electricity, heat and transport sectors, by 2030."

WINDFARM UPDATES

Scottish Borders: Plans have been lodged by Energiekontor UK for a 12 turbine windfarm development on uplands to the south of Hawick. The company had originally been looking at building 15 turbines as part of the Pines Burn project, but scaled down its proposals following public local consultations.

South Lanarkshire: Plans to extend Banks Renewables' Kype Muir windfarm, south of Strathaven, have been approved by the Scottish Government. 15 additional turbines are to be erected; there are 26 currently in development.

TIDAL POWER

Atlantis Resources Ltd has won a £20m EU grant for its MeyGen tidal project in the Pentland Firth after revealing the next phase of Stroma project to build a 6 MW turbine set [Nov 16]. The project will start its construction in the spring of this year and planners expect it to start producing commercially available power by 2018.

NUCLEAR WASTE

The *BBC News* website reported that plans have been approved to increase the size of an interim facility to store radioactive waste at the former Chapelcross nuclear plant near Annan, Dumfries & Galloway. It has been designed to be able to store intermediate level waste for up to 150 years until a final disposal location is available off-site. Plans for a smaller facility were approved in 2014 and work has already started on its construction. Larger storage capacity is needed because of changes in packaging rather than an increase in the overall amount of waste to be stored. Chapelcross ceased power generation in 2004. Decommissioning work on the site is ongoing; final site clearance is expected to commence in 2085 and be completed by 2095.



TOURISM & RECREATION

SPEYSIDE WAY

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)'s plans for a 1.8 km extension of the Speyside Way, between Ardegal and Insh, have been called in – by the CNPA.

GALLOWAY KITE TRAIL

An economic study carried out by RSPB Scotland showed that the red kite trail at Loch Ken, near Castle Douglas in Dumfries & Galloway, has directly contributed more than £8.2m to the local economy since it opened to the public in 2003. It has attracted more than 100,000 visitors and now supports the equivalent of 21 full-time jobs in the region. The birds of prey were re-introduced to the area in 2001; a total of 105 breeding pairs were counted in Dumfries & Galloway surveys in 2016, with at least 120 young fledged. The survey found that almost 70% of respondents had travelled to the area from outside Scotland, with two thirds visiting Dumfries & Galloway for the first time.

FAIRY POOLS

Miginish Community Hall Association on Skye has been awarded £11,835 from the Scottish Land Fund towards acquiring land from Forest Enterprise Scotland to expand the car park at the Fairy Pools to take around 100 cars. The present car park can accommodate 30 vehicles, and the single track road is being used for overflow parking for this popular beauty spot.

RUBHA REIDH LIGHTHOUSE

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that the Highland Council has begun enforcement proceedings to remove gates erected by the owners of Rubha Reidh lighthouse, near Gairloch in Wester Ross. Over 2,000 people signed a petition objecting to the restrictions, which were designed initially to stop people driving from Melvaig, some three miles from the lighthouse itself. However, the council said that signs the owners had erected had no legal status and that the road from Melvaig was a public one. The owners were asked to remove the gates to comply with access legislation, but did not do so. A roads notice has

been issued to remove the gates. The owners do not accept that there is a public right of passage from Melvaig to the lighthouse, and are taking legal action against the council.

CAIRNGORM MOUNTAIN

The *Press & Journal* reported that the CNPA unanimously granted permission, retrospectively, for an access track close to the Shieling Tow mid-station on Cairn Gorm [Jul 16]. The road was formed as part of work to upgrade the ski run with a new lift. Natural Retreats, operator of CairnGorm Mountain ski resort, then decided to retain the track rather than remove it, prompting the application. Katherine Donnachie, of CNPA, said that the track was deemed to 'fit appropriately' into the landscape.

A spokesman for the Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group said: "We are very concerned at the unacceptable standard of work at this key location that breached Scottish Natural Heritage guidelines for hill tracks. It is imperative that Highlands & Islands Enterprise and Natural Retreats take seriously the public concern and heed warnings from the CNPA that this must never happen again."

Eleanor Mackintosh, of CNPA, said: "[It was] frustrating that the applicants did not gain the correct planning consents before starting work."

David Gibson, of Mountaineering Scotland (MS), objected to the plan and said that it adds to MS's concerns about the serious proliferation of hill tracks throughout Scotland. Other objections were based around environmental concerns, including damage to native habitats and species. Objectors also raised concern the works had been carried out without planning permission.

Natural Retreats said that retaining the track would minimise disturbance elsewhere because it provides a safe route away from high voltage cables.

Janette Jansson, of CairnGorm Mountain, said: "We already had permission for the main project, so this technically counts as a retrospective planning application; it's a quirk in the planning system and does not mean we have been working without planning permission, but it's understandable why it has led to some confusion."

"The track will help us keep the area in the best possible condition for our snow sports customers as it will make it easier for vehicles such as quad bikes and land rovers to access the area for summer maintenance and fencing installation. It will also be greatly beneficial in moving and positioning our snow making guns. Ultimately, there will be less disruption to the environment when further improvement works need to be carried out as we will already have a permanent access track in place."

FOX HUNTING

The Scottish Government said that operation and enforcement of the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002 is to be strengthened. In response to a review by the Rt Hon Lord Bonomy on hunting with dogs, the government will invite key stakeholders to work together to develop a code of practice for hunts and explore the potential for a new monitoring scheme [Nov 16].

Ministers will also consult on Lord Bonomy's proposed changes to the existing legislation. These include:

- The introduction of vicarious liability and reverse burden of proof provisions
- An extension to the time limit for bringing prosecutions
- The removal of inconsistencies and the improvement of definitions

The Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, said: "This package of measures will substantially improve the language used in the existing legislation, address inconsistencies in the law, and strengthen the scrutiny and accountability of hunts."



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

CROFTING COMMISSION

Bill Barron has been appointed as chief executive at the Crofting Commission, following on from Catriona Maclean.

HIE

MSPs voted to demand that the Scottish Government allow Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) to retain its own board to 'reflect the priorities' of the Highlands and Islands area [Nov 16]. Opposition MSPs united behind the Holyrood motion. The government wants a new Scotland-wide statutory board coordinating the activities of Scottish Enterprise, HIE, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council. HIE supports economic growth in the Northern Isles, Western Isles, Highlands, Moray and Argyll. Speaking during First Minister's Questions, Nicola Sturgeon said that the vote would be 'fully taken into account.' She said HIE's headquarters and chief executive would remain in Inverness.

RAMBLERS SCOTLAND

Ramblers Scotland has published a 10 Year Vision and Strategic Framework, following a consultation with members and workshops at the Scottish Council. It focuses on three key strategic themes: A Scotland Designed for Walking, Helping Others Find their Feet, and Connecting People Through Ramblers Scotland.

RSPB SCOTLAND

The Ieach reported that a legacy investment to mark the 200th anniversary of Lagavulin Distillery on Islay, has awarded £60,000 to RSPB Scotland to fund peat restoration projects at The Oa and Loch Gruinart.

SNH BUDGET

Scottish Natural Heritage expects to receive £45.47m from the Scottish Government in 2016/17. In 2015/16 it received £50.486m, and in 2011/12 £57.169m.

SCENES

A newshound, covering the *Press & Journal*, has retired. In return for a free copy of *SCENES*, the newshound undertakes to send in appropriate press cuttings each month, with SAEs supplied. Is there a P&J reader who would like to take this on? Please contact the editor.

• A newshound is offering a run of *SCENES* from October 1998 to December 2014, free of charge, but the recipient pays carriage. Issues for January 2015 to December 2016 exist, and could also be made available. Contact Richard Gulliver: 01496 302432

• *SCENES* editor/publisher vacancy: please contact the editor for details!