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CONSERVATION

PUFFINS

An RSPB Scotland project to aid conservation efforts for puffins has been awarded £49,800 by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Puffin numbers across the UK and Europe have plummeted leading to the species being declared vulnerable to global extinction on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, with further declines of between 50-79% estimated by 2065. Warming seas, caused by climate change, affecting puffins' food sources are thought to be one of the main threats to their numbers.

Project Puffin (UK) combines the technology with citizen science to discover more about what puffins feed their chicks, where they go to find food and how their numbers are changing.

Over 80% of the British and Irish population of puffins is found in Scotland. Counts will take place at a number of puffin colonies. GPS trackers will be fitted to puffins at two sites in Scotland to provide information on where parents go to fish. Further information on the diet of puffins will be gathered by photographing puffins with fish in their bills during June and July.

NATTERJACK TOADS

The BBC News website reported that natterjack toad numbers have increased fivefold on the RSPB Scotland Mersehead reserve in Dumfries & Galloway since a conservation project was begun there in 2013 [Jan 14]. There were concerns for their survival after winter storms had destroyed sand dunes which they hibernate in. About 30 breeding males were counted on the site at the start of the project but reached 150 at the end of 2016. Shallow ponds were created for the toads to breed in; there is evidence of toads breeding in three of the five new ponds. Natterjack populations are declining across most of their range in Scotland due to climate change and inappropriate management; the Solway Firth is the only place that natterjacks are currently found.

PEATLANDS

The £8m Peatlands Action Fund is now open for applications, which will help the Scottish Government deliver on its proposals to restore 250,000 hectares of peatlands by 2032 [Jan 16].

Around 1.7 million hectares of Scotland is covered in peatlands and keeping them well-maintained mitigates climate change by locking in carbon. If left in a degraded condition they produce greenhouse gas emissions rather than act as a sink for soaking up carbon.

More than 10,000 hectares of peatland has been transformed by 150 projects since 2013 using this funding. A further 8,000 hectares will be restored in 2017-18 with a target of 250,000 hectares by 2032. This significant increase in peatland restoration forms part of Scotland's draft Climate Plan, which is currently going through parliament [Jan 17]. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) will deliver the fund on behalf of the Scottish Government.

See: <http://bit.ly/2nEB29K>

NEW NATIONAL PARKS?

The Galloway National Park Association is putting together a proposal for the creation of a new national park in Dumfries & Galloway. It is hoped to put the plans before the Scottish Government

by the end of the year. Finlay Carson MSP has called on local communities to make the case for a Galloway National Park. However, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, said that the Scottish Government had no current plans to designate any new national parks. However, she did say that she would not rule them out in the future should specific proposals from communities come forward.

A new national park could potentially bring together National Scenic Areas, Galloway Forest Park, the Dark Sky Park and the Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere.

A Big Lottery grant of almost £10,000 has been awarded to complete a feasibility study for plans for a new Borders National Park. The study will be presented to Scottish Borders Council in May.

PEARL MUSSELS

The Herald reported that river watchers from the Ness & Beaully Fisheries Trust discovered a kill of freshwater pearl mussels in the River Moriston, which runs into Loch Ness [Nov 16]. Scotland has 21 designated sites for pearl mussels, holding about half of the world's population. Over the past 100 years, more than one third of rivers which used to contain freshwater pearl mussels no longer do.

SOUTHERN GOLDEN EAGLES

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £1.3m to the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project [Nov 16]. At present there are only between two and four pairs of the bird across Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders and the project hopes to make them a more common sight throughout the area. A study has shown that there is suitable habitat for somewhere between 10 and 16 breeding pairs across southern parts of the country. Recent satellite tagging has shown that the south of Scotland eagles are isolated from larger populations in the Highlands.

Work will start on the project this autumn, subject to a licence application lodged with SNH being approved. The white-tailed eagle and red kite introduction projects will be used as models. In summer 2018 and for the next four years it is planned to raise and release between five and ten young eagles. Single chicks will be bought from broods in the Highlands.

The project involves RSPB Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates, Forestry Commission Scotland, SNH, Buccleuch Estates and the Langholm Initiative.

HEDGEHOGS

SNH is planning a large-scale hedgehog eradication project on South Uist and Benbecula [Feb 15]. The mammals are not native to the islands, but in 1974 seven were released on South Uist to eat slugs. The population grew and the hedgehogs were found to eat the eggs of ground-nesting birds. The Uist Wader Project began in 2001, but SNH now wants to step up the trapping and removal operation; this would build on Uist Hedgehog Rescue's work to catch the hedgehogs and transport them to the mainland for release. From 2001 to the present, the project has cost £2,679,362 and 2,441 hedgehogs have been removed.

David MacIannan, of SNH, said: "Our work

has successfully removed almost all introduced hedgehogs from North Uist – where their opportunity to predate wader nests has been greatly reduced. The key challenge for us and our partners now is to secure funding to deliver a large scale project that would aim to remove all the hedgehogs from the Uists and enable recovery of the internationally important wader populations. Work in this regard is ongoing. Our work involves trapping hedgehogs humanely and caring for them in a holding facility on Uist before they are relocated to mainland Scotland.”

SNH will work with the Western Isles Council, RSPB Scotland, local community landowner Storas Uibhist and Hesselhead Wildlife Rescue Trust.



FARMING

SCHMALLEMBERG VIRUS

The *BBC News* website reported that Schmallenberg Virus (SBV) has been confirmed in lambs in two flocks in the Scottish Borders. SBV was first detected in the UK in southern England in January 2012. It is spread by midges and can cause brain and limb deformities in lambs and calves. SAC Consulting said that cattle mated in the summer of 2017 would be at higher risk of SBV, at the edge of the northward progression of infected midges.

FARM CENSUS

The chief statistician in the Scottish Government has released the latest results from the December Agricultural Survey which show that the area of winter-sown crops in December 2016 was up on last December at 196,600 hectares, with 2,400 hectares more oilseed rape, 2,300 hectares more wheat, 700 hectares more oats, and 400 hectares more barley.

Cattle numbers fell 1.4%, to 1.71 million. There was a slight decrease in both beef cattle (down 1.2%) and dairy cattle (0.6%). December sheep numbers increased 1.7% to 5.04 million. Pig numbers continued to rise, with an 11% increase to 368,000, driven by an increase in the number of fattening pigs. In the poultry sector, a 19% increase in the number of broilers resulted in a 7% increase in the total, to 14.4 million.

Results for commercial farms only also show that the amount of grass silage produced on in 2016 saw a 7% fall, alongside reductions in hay and arable silage.

LAND STEWARDSHIP

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) has published a draft Land Stewardship Policy which sets out how farming, forestry and other activities should be supported in Scotland after the UK leaves the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The policy provides a blueprint for how public money could be spent in a way that ensures high-quality food and timber production whilst also safeguarding our natural environment and supporting a vibrant rural economy.

Jonny Hughes said: “To justify continued public investment in land stewardship we will need to make a much clearer case that this money will buy a range of public benefits in addition to food and timber. These public benefits include increasing the ability of soils, woodlands and peatlands to capture and store carbon, improving water quality through reducing pollution, reducing the risk of floods through allowing forests to regenerate and slow water flows, and creating nature-rich landscapes to help attract increasing numbers of visitors to rural Scotland. We have a once in a generation chance to change the failed CAP and create a new system of support based

on nurturing quality Scottish produce from a healthier environment. Our policy specifies how funding should be targeted to achieve the win-win of restoring our natural environment whilst also supporting Scotland’s rural economy and communities.”

SWT’s policy establishes a new system of support for land stewardship with three tiers of payments available to land owners and managers. For farmers and crofters this means:

- Natural Capital Maintenance payments – designed to ensure that stocks of natural capital are maintained, rather than depleted. These are area based payments for meeting a combination of mandatory criteria for all farms; and optional criteria tailored to farm type. Mandatory measures include providing wildlife habitat on at least 12% of the area of each farm

- Natural Capital Enhancement – designed to incentivise actions that will help build natural capital. These are non-competitive area-based payments available to all farms for carrying out additional optional actions. These include increasing wildlife habitat to more than 12% of each farm area; reducing stocking densities on sensitive habitats; conservation grazing; wildlife friendly cropping; mixed farming; and measures to encourage pollinators

- Natural Capital Restoration payments – designed to enable the delivery of a greater level of public benefits and address risks such as resilience to climate change. These are competitive additional payments designed to deliver specific public good priorities including natural flood management and habitat and species conservation

The policy includes plans for a number of dedicated funds to support a specific aims. These are:

- An Environmental Co-operative Action Fund of at least £4m per year to support collaboration between landholdings at the landscape scale to deliver integrated catchment management and create a National Ecological Network

- A Challenge Fund of at least £4m per year to fund work to restore protected areas to favourable condition

- A Challenge Fund of at least £5m per year for Invasive Non Native Species control and eradication programmes

- A Challenge Fund of at least £16m per year for peatland restoration

- A Challenge Fund of at least £10m per year to fund works to achieve good ecological status and implement natural flood management

- A Challenge Fund for woodland creation and stewardship of at least £108m per year

LFASS

The future of the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) has been outlined by Rural Secretary Fergus Ewing. Because of compulsory changes to the scheme by the European Commission, it is proposed that hill farmers and crofters in Scotland’s most fragile and remote areas will receive a ‘parachute payment’ in 2018 of 80% of their LFASS payment rate. LFASS provides support to more than 11,000 farmers and crofters.

Mr Ewing said: “Unfortunately I am unable to give farmers and crofters assurance on LFASS from 2019 as, despite repeated requests, the UK government has still not guaranteed that the scheme will be funded in 2019. I have therefore once again written to the UK government seeking assurance over LFASS 2019 and also the £190m in external convergence uplift as a matter of urgency. It is only fair that we receive

swift confirmation on LFASS 2019 and that the convergence monies are repatriated to Scotland, in full, so that we can provide certainty to our farmers and crofters, and afford to pay them a rate that ensure the economic viability and sustainability of these remote areas.”

LFASS is part of the £1.3 billion Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) 2014-2020. The European rules do not permit the Scottish Government to continue with LFASS unchanged after 2017. They foresee a change from LFASS to an Areas Facing Natural Constraint (ANC) scheme and area designation from 2018, or for those that do not make the transition to ANC in 2018, they may continue with their current schemes paying up to 80% of payments in 2018. Degressivity will also have to be introduced, where above a set area threshold payments will reduce. The changes to LFASS will require to be submitted to, and approved by, the European Commission before they are finalised.

The Herald reported that both the hill farming sector and the Scottish Government had tried to convince the EU to continue with LFASS, long valued for its targeted contribution to Scotland’s more marginal livestock producers.

Andrew McCormick, of NFU Scotland, said; “Post-Brexit, we will have the chance to design a support scheme for Scottish hill farmers and crofters that will be fit for purpose but, for now, this parachute payment must act as a stepping stone. With 80% of existing support on offer, we are now in discussions with the Scottish Government on a targeted menu of easily accessible small capital grant schemes and additional elements that will give LFA farmers and crofters an opportunity to access the remaining 20% ... While the parachute system is not ideal, it is significantly better than the cliff edge of ANC payments that active upland beef and extensive hill sheep producers faced.” He said that the ANC concept for classifying ‘less-than-ideal agricultural land’ has found little favour with NFU Scotland, which has criticised its ‘onerous and restrictive rules.’

The Scottish Crofting Federation expressed its deep disappointment at the Scottish decision to ‘dodge’ the planned ANC support scheme, claiming that it would have sent much more money towards the crofting counties.

See: www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/SRDP

NATIVE BEES

The Scottish Native Honey Bee Society has been formed to help protect *Apis Mellifera Mellifera* and to convince more keepers to convert their colonies to native bees. This indigenous species is hardier than other species and more suitable to a Scottish climate. Imported bees are more readily available but carry a greater risk of bringing in disease from the Varroa mite.

Dr Ewan Campbell, of the University of Aberdeen, said: “We want to raise awareness that there is a native honey bee in Scotland and that there is value in its conservation. Disease and hybridisation are putting the native honey bee in real trouble here. We know, thanks to modern genetics and morphology, that small pockets of native honey bees do still cling on in some parts of Scotland, but for how long?”



WOODLANDS

GREAT WOOD OF CALEDON

The Herald reported that Professor Brian Huntley, of Durham University, found that the present climate is more suitable for oak than the Scots Pine which characterise fragments of the Great Wood of Caledon. These unique features of the Highlands are categorised as Priority Habitat under the EU Habitats Directive, with ten of the remaining areas

designated Special Areas of Conservation. If present forests were to be destroyed or disturbed, a computer model showed that they would be replaced by oak woodlands.

Scots pine came to dominate under cooler conditions that pre-dated the Industrial Revolution. The annual mean temperature in the Scottish Highlands has increased by about 0.7°C since 1800, with larger increases in the winter months. This results in a 'climatic debt' which means that Scots pine would be replaced by trees more suitable to today's temperatures. The research has implications for the future conservation of the Caledonian Pinewoods and their associated species. The study recommends the identification and conservation of sites more favourable for the growth of Scots pine.



FISHFARMING & FISHERIES

FISHFARM PESTICIDES

The *Sunday Herald* reported that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) has begun a review of the discharge licences of 360 fishfarms to tighten conditions for the use of emamectin, used to kill sea-lice, following discussions with the UK government's Veterinary Medicines Directorate [Feb 17]. Emamectin benzoate (Slice) is commonly used. The issuing of new licences will be completed by the end of April.

SEPA said that a study, commissioned from the Scottish Aquaculture Research Forum, had shown 'unexpected' links had been found between 'very low' levels of emamectin and the loss of crabs, lobsters and other crustaceans. It is now reviewing its environmental safety limits for the pesticide to check they provide adequate environmental protection. The study concluded that the use of emamectin at fishfarms was associated with 'substantial, wide-scale reductions in both the richness and abundance of non-target crustacea.' It said that toxic effects occur at levels much lower than those that are currently detectable, and suggested that there was no threshold below which emamectin would be harmless. It reported: "The evidence suggests that benthic crustacea may not be adequately protected by the current regulation of emamectin use in Scottish salmon farms."

Guy Linley-Adams, of Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland (S&TCS), said: "SEPA should now also scrap any idea of allowing across-the-board increases in permitted biomass. The fundamental problem here is that Scottish Government policy, to expand fishfarming at all costs, is way out of step with what the sea lochs can actually support." The Scottish Government has backed a fishfarming industry plan to double production by 2030.

Don Staniford, of the Global Alliance Against Industrial Aquaculture, said that fishfarmers had been stopped from using teflubenzuron to kill sea-lice in 2015; SEPA must now ban the use of emamectin.

SEPA 'suppressed' the critical report, written in August 2016, on pesticides killing wildlife following private lobbying from the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO), according to internal emails seen by the *Sunday Herald* under freedom of information law. SEPA had been intending to prevent salmon farmers from using emamectin to kill sea-lice in 2018. The report disclosed that SEPA was planning to impose tighter restrictions on the use of the pesticide for the next two years. It was then likely that the ability to use the chemical, marketed

as Slice, 'will be phased out completely.' SSPO said that publication of the report would trigger 'media scrutiny which will seek to undermine the industry's reputation and will probably damage all of our reputations.'

SEPA's published statement (above) made no mention of a ban in 2018. It said: "SEPA is reviewing all fishfarm licences permitting the use of Slice, tightening conditions for the medicine's use. This restriction will remain in place while SEPA and the industry carry out further research to either confirm or confound the apparent link between Slice use and possible environmental effects."

Dr Richard Luxmoore, of the National Trust for Scotland, said: "I fail to understand how SEPA can justify delaying action to ban this harmful environmental toxin. Many of the existing fishfarms lie within Special Areas of Conservation and research by the Scottish Association for Marine Science concludes that the toxins discharged from the farms have already harmed marine wildlife over a large area."

Guy Linley-Adams said: "It appears that SEPA has been browbeaten into allowing excessive treatment chemicals to be used, which has damaged the ecology of the sea lochs, particularly wild crustaceans such as crabs and lobsters."

Terry A'Hearn, of SEPA, said: "I am happy for SEPA to be accountable for the outcome of those actions. SEPA made its own decision in August 2016 not to publish a website article about a scientific report."

See: *SARF098: Towards Understanding of the Environmental Impact of a Sea Lice Medicine – the PAMP Suite*; <http://bit.ly/2mWB39m>

LOCH EWE FISHFARM

The *Scotsman* reported that S&TCS called for a fishfarm to be removed from Loch Ewe, where it has been for 30 years, to combat sea-lice infestations. S&TCS said that the government must also introduce tighter regulation and controls on sea-lice on fishfarms to safeguard wild salmon and sea trout.

An S&TCS campaign is aimed at restoring populations of sea trout in Loch Maree, once considered the finest sea trout fishery in the country. Catches in Loch Maree plummeted in 1988, a year after commercial salmon farming began in Loch Ewe. The two lochs are connected via the River Ewe. S&TCS believes that sea trout numbers will recover naturally over time if the fishfarm, owned by Marine Harvest, is relocated.

Andrew Graham-Stewart, of S&TCS, said: "With the benefit of hindsight, no-one – including Marine Harvest – would have located an open-cage salmon farm in such an enclosed sea loch as Loch Ewe. The consequences for wild sea trout and the world-renowned Loch Maree fishery have been catastrophic."

Ben Hadfield, of Marine Harvest Scotland, said that declines in wild fish are likely due to climate change and over-fishing. He said: "We feel that this is not a balanced view because the decline of large sea trout in that area predates the development of salmon farming. Loch Ewe is one of our smaller farms and an isolated area where we have little or no challenge from sea-lice." He said that the company had discussed a proactive relocation of the site but S&TCS was unwilling to accept the proposal.

FISHFARM APPLICATIONS

Scottish Environment LINK has objected to Marine Harvest (Scotland's) application for the expansion of the Loch Duich fishfarm. LINK said that the levels of pollutants entering the Lochs Duich, Long & Alsh Special Area of

Conservation (SAC) and Marine Protected Area (MPA) will greatly increase. These are likely to have direct effects on the designated features – reefs in the case of the SAC and burrowed mud in the MPA. LINK said that consideration should also be given to rescinding the existing licence.

- The Friends of the Sound of Jura group wrote to the *Sunday Herald* letters page and called on SEPA to exercise the precautionary principle and grant no licences for new fish farms within MPAs or other protected areas, until it can be certain the use of sea-lice chemicals isn't harming marine wildlife. The shellfish at Dounie are economically valuable, caught by creel fishermen and destined to be eaten by people, and by the critically endangered skate living in the MPA where the fish farm is proposed. SNH has expressed concern about this to SEPA.

- Scottish Environment LINK also objected to a proposed fishfarm on the Isle of Rum. The site lies within a Special Protection Area designated to protect 40% of the breeding population of Manx Shearwaters and a number of other seabirds and is in the Small Isles MPA. There is also a strong chance that the use of chemical sea lice therapeutants will cause mortality to seabirds and otters through direct ingestion and secondary poisoning. The same therapeutants are likely to have a direct impact on several of the invertebrate features of the MPA, notably the commercially important *Nephrops norvegicus*. A Habitats Regulations Appraisal should be undertaken before considering approval for this farm.

- Scottish Environment LINK has objected to the resiting of an existing marine fishfarm at Port Na Cro, Isle of Shuna in Argyll. The farm is located within the Loch Sunart to the Sound of Jura MPA. Research carried out by SEPA has shown that the benthic sediments in the Sound of Shuna have already breached Environmental Quality Standards in respect of contamination with emamectin benzoate.

A neighbouring farm at Rubh an Trilleachain suffered a major mortality event in 2016, losing over 400 tonnes of salmon.

Increased mortality of crustaceans from use of the sea-lice therapeutant will not only impact important local creel fisheries but potentially also the benthic invertebrates on which the local population of common skate depends. Common skate have been reported in this part of the MPA and are likely to transit through the Sound of Shuna. LINK said that it would be premature to grant permission for modifications to this fishfarm before SEPA's review (above) has been completed. Shuna Sounds falls within the candidate harbour porpoise Special Area of Conservation and frequently used by harbour porpoises, including mother and calf pairs; LINK objects to the use of acoustic deterrent devices at the site. See: <http://bit.ly/2nbYZVe>

However, Argyll & Bute Council's planning department approved the relocation of the fishfarm from the island into the middle of Shuna Sound.

AQUACULTURE FUNDING

Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) has approved £1m of funding to boost innovation in aquaculture. HIE will run the trial programme in conjunction with the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre. The project has been set up to help small businesses to commercialise new innovative products for the fishfarming industry.

TWEED STOCKS

The River Tweed Commission (RTC) annual report has shown that the total salmon catch on the River Tweed fell by 7% in 2016 compared with the previous year, their lowest level for a number of years. Overall numbers caught by rod and line and by net fell from 8,644 in 2015 to 8,221 last year.

RTC said that balancing declining stocks and the need for protection would be a challenge for the foreseeable future. Autumn catches in particular had declined and could result in an increased reliance on spring and summer fishing.

A reduction in poaching activity was reported over the year covered by the report.

SALMON STOCKS

The *Courier* reported that Arnot McWhinnie, a leading angler, said that, as salmon stocks seem to diminish each year, the Scottish Government does very little to help them, despite the fact that salmon fishing contributes to the Scottish economy and provides many jobs. He said: “Many of you, like me, will be worried about the future of our salmon stocks. Sportsmen from all over the UK and Europe come here to fish for salmon, but nowadays, like the fish, their numbers are diminishing because there are simply not enough salmon for them to catch. While the Scottish Government backs Norwegian-owned fishfarms to the hilt, their only answer to the reduction in salmon stocks is to impose catch and release on anglers, criminalising them if they kill a salmon at certain times of year, and on certain rivers.”

He said that predators, such as seals, dolphins, and goosanders, were the main problem on the east coast, while on the west coast it was fishfarms, located at or near the mouth of virtually every estuary. These produce a ‘sea-lice soup’ which young fish have to swim through, with many being eaten alive by the parasites. Many of the salmon farms are operated by Norwegian companies: “Their country has much stricter regulations which impact on their profits, so what do they do? They come to Scotland where regulations are less strict. It is high time the Scottish Government clamped down on the way these farms operate.”

A Scottish Government spokesman said: “Scottish wild salmon is a valuable and important asset and we are taking action to protect stocks. We have introduced catch and release in areas where stocks are below their conservation limit and an annual assessment of conservation status on individual rivers rather than at district level, which will help to protect our weakest stocks to ensure they are here for future generations to enjoy. Scotland also has a proportionate legislative and regulatory framework which balances growing aquaculture sustainably and protecting biodiversity and the environment on which aquaculture and wild fisheries depend.”

HADDOCK STOCKS

The *BBC News* website reported that the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) downgraded Scottish North Sea and West Coast haddock on its Good Fish Guide after stock numbers fell. Two North Sea haddock fisheries are now rated as amber – scoring four on a scale of one to five, where one is the most sustainable. Haddock from the west coast fishery has dropped from being a good choice (rated two) to one to eat only occasionally (rated three).

Bernadette Clarke of the MCS Good Fish Guide, said: “These ratings changes have come about because scientific perception of the stock has changed. Compared to 2015, the stock numbers in 2016 were below the recommended level and at the point where action is now needed to increase the number of fish of breeding age. There’s no suggestion that fishermen should stop fishing, taking fish from these areas, but there is a scientific recommendation to reduce the amount of catches taken from these areas in 2017 ... MCS has not called for haddock be taken off menus. MCS only actively asks this when a fishery or farming method is red rated (rated five).

“The new ratings for North Sea and West of Scotland haddock are three and four. The new ratings come after the latest scientific advice from ICES, which was released in November last year. This advice indicated that the levels of fishing that can be considered sustainable for this population are lower than previously thought, meaning a smaller proportion should be caught. This means that advice for catches in 2017 are 47% lower than originally advised for catches in 2016.”

However, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which certifies the sustainability of fish and seafood, contradicted the MCS advice and insisted consumers can continue to eat haddock with a ‘clear conscience.’ James Simpson, of MSC, said: “The Scottish haddock fishery is still MSC certified due to the strong management they have in place to deal with changing stocks. The Scottish haddock fishermen have already worked with the government to set lower quotas in response to the latest scientific advice. In fact they’ve set their catches even lower than the recommendations. It’s a bold move to protect the haddock stock for the long term. This is a great example of a responsible reactive management responding to fluctuations in stock status and that’s exactly what MSC certification is about: long-term sustainability.”

The *Herald* reported that Bertie Armstrong, of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, said: “The MCS has completely misunderstood the position as far as haddock stocks are concerned and should withdraw its utterly misleading comments. The organisation is trying to alter consumer behaviour on completely false premises and should desist at once. Fish stocks are sustainable when the amount of fish caught is below the maximum sustainable yield. For haddock that has been the case since 2007, and only last year advice from fisheries scientists at the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas was for an increase in the catch of 30%.”



MARINE

MPA SOCIOECONOMICS

The *Scottish Marine Protected Areas Socioeconomic Monitoring 2016 Report* provides an assessment of emerging evidence on the socio-economic impacts of Scotland’s Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). This report presents evidence from key informant interviews, analysis of fishing activity data and three case studies. The report concludes that, at the national level, there is no evidence to-date of significant socioeconomic impacts that could be attributed to the introduction of MPA management measures [Feb 16]. This is consistent with evidence provided by Marine Scotland prior to the introduction of MPA management measures.

The *Herald* reported that the study focuses on the first tranche of ten MPAs and ten inshore Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) that are under the EU Habitats Directive. It gathered evidence from interviewing fishermen, and analysing fishing activity data and three case studies of the South Arran and Wester Ross MPAs and the East Mingulay SAC in the Outer Isles.

The lack of significant positive or negative socioeconomic impacts applies to the fishing industry, aquaculture, tourism, seafood processing and other marine and coastal developments. However, at more localised levels, individual fishing vessels have been displaced from some fishing grounds to adapt to the management measures introduced. The report said: “With the exception of one vessel, all displaced vessels were still operating at the time evidence was gathered for this report. In the case of the vessel that

stopped fishing, there is evidence to suggest business viability had been impacted by the introduction of the MPA management measures.” The report found that two other vessels had stopped fishing, either sold or not replaced; there was limited independent evidence this was linked directly to the MPAs.

It says there is evidence that the losses in fishing grounds within MPAs have largely been substituted by increased effort outside these areas, or that the reduction in income has been small ‘relative to annual variations in earnings for fishing businesses.’ But one skipper said the loss of the East Mingulay SAC, where there were better quality prawns, had cost him £60,000 in the summer months. However he had changed vessels, so it was difficult to compare with previous years, the report said.

Meanwhile the South Arran MPA case study found that trawler vessels fished around five to six weeks a year in the affected area mainly in poor weather during winter months. Historically it accounted for around 10-15% of a vessels’ winter income. But the study was undertaken prior to the winter season, and landings data was not available to verify these claims.

The report recognises there is concern about sustainability of stocks in areas outside protected area because of increased fishing because of displacement of fishing effort. This should be part of an ongoing monitoring programme and a further evaluation was being commissioned by Marine Scotland for 2018.

Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, said that the Scottish Government had prioritised funding through the European Maritime & Fisheries Fund and was supporting applications from vessel skippers looking for assistance to change their fishing practices.

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

CROMARTY FIRTH

The *Herald* reported that a petition, with more than 100,000 signatories, has been delivered to Highland Council by Cromarty Rising, a campaign group opposed to ship-to-ship oil transfers at the mouth of the Cromarty Firth [Feb 17]. The local authority is a consultee in the resubmission of the Cromarty Firth Port Authority (CFPA)’s application for a licence to conduct the transfers. The site is one of the most important dolphin sites in Europe and is also close to other important protected environmental sites.

In a statement, the group said: “Cromarty Rising has recently been made aware that CFPA solicitors see no legal impediment whatsoever to the continued use of Nigg Terminal for ship-to-ship transfers. The Secretary of State Transport (Westminster) also confirmed, after a month long detailed review, that there is a perfectly valid ship-to-ship licence still in place for Nigg Terminal.”

A spokesman for the port authority responded: “The Port is acting in the interests of the majority of our stakeholders but we do understand that some people are against our application. They have the right to show their feelings by protesting, as they are doing. As the statutory harbour authority, it is important our stakeholders understand that we have a legal obligation to protect the environment of the Cromarty Firth. Due to the amount of work involved in reviewing this refined application, it will not be completed to allow the 42 day consultation before the end of May. To ensure that all statutory stakeholders and local communities have the time to consider the revised document in full, the Port will not be submitting our refined application until later in the year.”

SEAWEED CULTIVATION

The first set of policy guidelines for the commercial cultivation of seaweed in Scotland have been

published. This development will create opportunities to grow Scotland's seaweed industry by providing clarity over where seaweed may be grown, along with what kinds of developments will be approved.

The Seaweed Cultivation Policy Statement also sets out the framework concerning the environmental impacts of seaweed farms, including the requirements to:

- Consider and mitigate adverse environmental impacts
- Ensure that only native species are cultivated
- Be sited away from sources of pollution, where growing for human consumption
- Allow small-medium size farms (defined as being 0-50 x 200 metre lines) to be located anywhere in Scotland, subject to agreement and appropriate local conditions.

These guidelines do not apply to the wild harvesting of seaweed. Seaweed farms are a similar size to a typical mussel farm.

Dr Michele Stanley, of the Scottish Association for Marine Science, said: "Over the last couple of years we have seen a growing interest in the cultivation of seaweeds for a variety of uses. The publication of the Seaweed Cultivation Policy Statement will start to give this industry, which is very much in its infancy, much needed guidance and clarity about setting up a seaweed farm. It will hopefully help to encourage the expansion of commercial seaweed farming in a sustainable and environmental friendly manner."

See: <http://bit.ly/2o8VGOa>



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Herald reported that several Holyrood committees have published reports on the draft plan climatic change bill [Jan 17].

Patrick Harvie MSP, speaking at First Minister's Questions, urged ministers to do more to ensure it contains the ambitious choices that are needed and accused the SNP and the other parties at Holyrood of clinging on to a 'shared desperate attachment to the economics of the fossil fuel industry.' Mr Harvie said: "Over recent weeks, parliamentary scrutiny of the government's draft climate plan has exposed serious omissions and contradictions. We've seen the Environment Secretary defending a plan that does nothing to improve bus use and saying car journeys are destined to go up by 25% while the transport minister says 'no, that's only worst-case scenario'. We've had the Environment Secretary telling the chamber about a government policy for compulsory soil-testing to reduce fertiliser use and a fortnight later the Rural Economy Secretary writes to committees to say 'no, that's definitely not happening'.

"Although the Finance Secretary admits that there has been no attempt to build a credible economic case for his plan to cut aviation tax, he tells us that the rest of the economy can make up for the extra emissions from all that flying, even though the climate plan itself is utterly devoid of detail for how that is going to happen. The climate plan is barely half baked. Isn't it clear that major changes are needed if we're going to ensure the ambitious choices Scotland needs to make are actually written into the plan? ... It's very clear that there is serious concern and that changes to this draft plan will need to be equally serious".

The Deputy First Minister said: "The government's climate change plan takes in a huge number of measures and interventions across

government to enable us to fulfil the targets that we have set for ourselves. The government has already achieved early the 2020 target that we put in place for carbon emissions reductions, that's something we should all as a Parliament be proud of. We legislated for that ambitious legislation a number of years ago and we're now seeing that fulfilled as a result of the government's leadership and actions. I would ask Mr Harvie to consider the achievements that have been made so far and to work with the government on taking forward measures that will have a substantive effect in reinforcing targets in the years to come."

CROFTING

The Rural Economy & Connectivity committee has asked the Scottish Government to produce a new crofting bill which 'fully meets the needs of crofting communities in the 21st Century.' The committee report follows a review of governance of the Crofting Commission, and said that comprehensive updates to legislation were needed; these should be introduced by the end of the current session of parliament [Feb 17]. It said that the Scottish Government needs to develop a clear policy setting out the role crofting is expected to play in the 21st century. The committee called on crofting regulation to better reflect modern practices, for the role of commissioners to be carefully considered and defined and for more financial assistance for crofters to comply with the map-based register. It also suggested that the development function of crofting be returned to the commission; it had been handed over to Highlands & Islands Enterprise in 2010.

Bill Barron, the new chief executive of the Crofting Commission, said that the review had raised important points which he was committed to addressing.

The SNP, as part of its pre-election manifesto, pledged to introduce a new, simplified crofting bill by 2021. The Scottish Government will be now be required to consult before coming up with its own proposals for a new crofting bill.

Sandy Murray, of NFU Scotland, said: "Reforming the legislation is only a small part of what is needed to take crofting forward in Scotland. The work that NFU Scotland has been doing, along with the Crofting Stakeholder Forum, on the other priorities for crofting includes common grazings, crofting development, supporting new entrants, affordable housing and support payments for crofters. That work is still ongoing and the need for a strategic approach and a national development plan is imperative."

WILDLIFE CRIME

The Scottish Parliament's environment committee reported on wildlife crime [Jan 17]. A letter from the committee called on the Environment Secretary, Roseanne Cunningham, to strengthen the group Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime in Scotland (PAWS) which was set up by the Scottish Government. The committee said that there was 'clear distrust' within PAWs between conservation groups, gamekeepers and the police, with 'deep divisions' between the groups. The committee report on said: "Wildlife crime is everybody's problem and whilst it welcomes the public condemnation of such crimes by the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) and others, it is of the view that more must be done by all concerned in terms of reporting to and cooperating with Police Scotland."

The committee accused RSPB Scotland of 'openly ignoring' PAWS protocols by failing to contact landowners when investigating the disappearance of birds of prey. RSPB Scotland insisted that this was permissible under the protocols, which it followed to the letter. The

BBC News website reported that tensions stem from a decision by RSPB Scotland to withhold information about the disappearance of some birds of prey; RSPB Scotland said that it did so to prevent potential perpetrators from hiding or disposing of evidence.

The committee claimed that Police Scotland lacked intelligence on whether losses of wildlife in specific areas were due to natural change or illegal persecution; this must be prioritised to get a clear picture of wildlife crime in Scotland.

Graeme Dey MSP, the committee convener, called for zero tolerance of wildlife crime. He said: "Tackling this issue effectively requires genuine, collaborative working and the committee was disappointed to see the clear distrust and tension which exists between some of those whose participation is so essential. The committee is calling for greater partnership working between all organisations including Police Scotland, the RSPB and the SGA operating within PAWS."

Duncan Orr-Ewing, of RSPB Scotland, said: "There are tensions between some PAWS partners over the scale and impact of crimes against some raptor populations. This is despite the fact that overwhelming corroborative facts have been presented over many years of a serious problem. Changes in illegal practices on the ground will not be implemented unless acceptance of what may be an unpalatable truth is agreed by all PAWS partners ... We will always work through the police, and not through other third parties who may be suspects in any case." He said that they always followed police advice when searching for missing birds of prey.

Mark Ruskell MSP said: "Killing of wildlife such as rare birds of prey is an utter disgrace and it's clear that the Police are leaving gaps in their investigatory and reporting work, which is increasing frustration amongst wildlife charities. It's time for the Scottish SPCA's well established investigatory role to be extended to wildlife crime to bolster Police efforts. The Scottish SPCA have a respected statutory role in relation to animal welfare cases already. I see no reason why this shouldn't be extended to wildlife crime. We were promised a decision by the Scottish Government six years ago on the Scottish SPCA's powers but it has yet to materialise."

- Andy Wightman MSP has tabled a parliamentary motion calling on the Scottish Government to increase the investigatory powers of the Scottish SPCA [Jan 15].



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

RAPTOR PERSECUTION

The Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime in Scotland (PAWS) has published maps showing details of recorded raptor persecution crimes in 2016 which show a 26% fall in recorded crimes. 14 confirmed bird of prey crimes are shown, compared to 19 the previous year. Species illegally killed included buzzards and a goshawk, while the golden eagle and osprey were victims of disturbance cases. There were four recorded incidents of poisoning, four shootings, three cases of disturbance and three trapping or attempted trapping offences. Confirmed poisoning incidents fell from six in 2015 to four last year.

The Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, said: "I have ordered a review of the data from satellite tagged birds of prey in an attempt to shed new light on the disappearance of a number of tagged birds ... The National Wildlife Crime Unit, now based in Stirling, plays an important role in protecting our wildlife. I'm delighted to confirm a further year of funding to

allow the unit to continue its important work and help protect all of our wildlife, including birds of prey.”

Specific details of three of the four bird of prey crimes recorded in 2016 are currently withheld for police operational reasons. It has therefore not been possible to include the locations of these incidents on the hotspot maps. The incidents are, however, included in the figures provided in the summary tables accompanying the maps.

The *BBC News* website reported that Douglas McAdam, of Scottish Land & Estates (SLE), a partner in PAWS Scotland, said that the figures were ‘encouraging’ but that work was still needed to eradicate the problem. Mr McAdam said: “The land management sector recognises that some of the incidents may have been related to game shooting interests and is committed to keep working to bring those figures down even further in future. We strongly endorse the careful use of proven police evidence in drawing up these maps and although there is limited information about some incidents, the range of species and locations indicates that the motivation behind these crimes is varied.”

Ian Thomson, of RSPB Scotland, said: “We share the concern of the environment secretary over the suspicious disappearance of satellite-tagged raptors, which do not feature in these statistics, and await the publication of the Scottish Government’s review of this issue with interest. There have been repeated instances showing that those criminals who kill Scotland’s protected birds of prey take great care in disposing of the evidence, so it is inevitable that the numbers of victims found will be small.” He said that the figures represented an ‘unknown proportion’ of total incidents and only included cases where police investigations had been completed.

A spokesman for the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) said: “There is definite evidence of changing attitudes regarding crime against wildlife in Scotland. This is reflected in the figures and a general downward trend over the past five or so years.”

SNARING REVIEW

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) undertook a review of snaring on behalf of the Scottish Government. The report has found that snaring related incidents have reduced since legislative changes were made to snaring regulations in 2011. The report has made recommendations for further improvements in the law, which further refine snaring practices which will mostly be delivered through the Snaring Code of Practice. These include:

- Implement a time period for updating snare records and reduce the time allowed for producing records to the police
- Introduce the power of disqualification for a snaring offence
- Changes to fox snares including enlarging the noose size to 26cm and increase the number of swivels to a minimum of two
- Consider how a strengthened Code of Practice can be better endorsed through legislation

The Scottish Government has asked SNH to take forward work to revise the Code of Practice in line with the recommendations in the review.

The Herald reported that Robbie Marsland, of the League against Cruel Sports Scotland, said: “This review was never going to resolve the problem, it was, sadly, a wasted opportunity. We will now step up our campaign to convince the government to take the common sense approach and ban the manufacture, sale, possession and use of all snares once and for all.”

The *BBC News* website reported that SNH said that it could not be ruled out that snaring caused unnecessary suffering to hares, which can still be shot in culls held at certain times of the year. Some landowners have culls of hares carried out on moorland to control the spread of sheep ticks to grouse and to prevent damage to young trees and plants [Jun 16].

An SNH spokesman said: “The snaring of mountain hares is only permitted under licence. We have not issued licences for this activity for several years and are not minded to do so. It is legal to control mountain hares by shooting outside their closed season and sometimes this is necessary to protect sensitive habitats and young trees. European legislation requires their population is maintained at a favourable conservation status. Right now, there isn’t enough information to conclude that culling is threatening this status. However, we don’t support large-scale culls where the intention is to remove hares or significantly reduce their numbers. We continue to urge voluntary restraint by shooting estates because of uncertainty over the long term trend in the hare population.”

Harry Huyton, of Onekind, said: “This decision is hugely significant because it effectively sets an ‘unnecessary suffering’ test for wildlife management practices. In terms of animal welfare, there is no difference between a mountain hare suffering in a snare and a fox suffering in a snare.”

Colin Shedden, of British Association for Shooting & Conservation Scotland, said that snaring hares was no longer common practice. He said: “However, there remains a need to control hare numbers to protect sensitive habitats, young trees, and to prevent disease transmission, and we support SNH in their efforts to determine current population densities. The issues and methods concerning fox snaring are entirely different and this remains a very effective method of control to protect livestock, especially at lambing time, and wildlife such as ground-nesting birds.”

GENERAL LICENCE RESTRICTIONS

SNH imposed a General Licence restriction order on four estates, including Raeshaw Estate near Heriot in Midlothian, where it was believed that raptor persecution had taken place but there was insufficient evidence to prosecute any individual [Nov 15]. A police search found traps attached to a cage containing a live pigeon in a wood owned by Corsehope Farm but kept by the Raeshaw Estate. Skeletal remains of birds of prey were found nearby and near a crow cage trap registered to the estate.

These restrictions were the first to be imposed since this new enforcement measure became available on 1 January 2014. The General Licence restriction on all four estates was to run until November 2018; certain types of ‘pest’ control were prohibited unless the estates applied for a specific individual licence that would be subject to tighter controls. Raeshaw Estate, with neighbouring Corsehope Farm, petitioned for a judicial review after an unsuccessful appeal [Feb 16].

The court has now decided that SNH had acted fairly and with due regard to the stated rationale for imposing a General Licence restriction as laid out in SNH’s framework for implementing restrictions. The 8,000 acre estate, much of it grouse moor, argued that the evidence relied on was unspecific and unconvincing and that there had been a failure to assess the measures put in place by the estate, such as training staff on relevant legislation. It was also maintained that the ruling lacked logic as the licensing system was

aimed at promoting wild bird conservation but the decision removed the control of predators and the effect was to frustrate conservation. Estate lawyers also argued that there had been a breach of natural justice as it had been denied the opportunity to investigate the case against it.

Lord Armstrong rejected the challenge, and held that the reasons given in the unsuccessful appeal were ‘entirely adequate’ [Feb 16]. He said: “The question at large was not whether the petitioner was responsible for wildlife crime but whether wildlife crime, or an attempt to commit it, had taken place on the land concerned. In that regard, I attach weight to the fact the evidence of the caged live pigeon and associated spring-traps was unchallenged.”

SNH said that General Licences rely to a large degree on trust. Its decision to implement this restriction in this case was carefully made and informed by clear evidence found by Police Scotland that wildlife crimes had been committed on the land. Ian Ross, of SNH, said: “We welcome the outcome of the judicial review. This was in effect a test case, and the result supports our decision. More widely this decision provides us with confidence that a light touch approach to regulation is not appropriate in situations in which there is evidence of wildlife crime having taken place, but no criminal convictions have been secured. Because of the remote locations where wildlife crime often takes place it can be difficult to find sufficient evidence to secure a criminal conviction. So we need every tool we can to help tackle wildlife crime in Scotland.”

Nick Halfhide, of SNH, said: “Nature-based tourism is worth £1.4 billion a year to Scotland’s economy. Raptor persecution detracts from that value and diminishes Scotland’s appeal as a major wildlife tourism destination. We are committed to working strongly in partnership with Police Scotland, and other members of the PAWS to stamp out wildlife crime in Scotland. This is a useful tool to help deter wildlife crime and we will now consider its use more widely.”

The Raptor Persecution UK blog reported that SNH has a backlog of General Licence restriction cases, dating back to 2014, awaiting the outcome of the judicial review process with Raeshaw Estate.

GOLDEN EAGLE MISSING

RSPB Scotland has issued an appeal for information following the disappearance of ‘388’ – a satellite tagged golden eagle. The young male eagle fledged from a nest in Deeside in 2016. The bird’s last recorded position was in Glenbuchat, Strathdon. Police investigations on the North Glenbuchat estate found no sign of the bird. Susan Davies, of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), said: “This is the fifth golden eagle to either go missing or be illegally killed on North Glenbuchat Estate in recent years.”

LAMMERMUIR MERLINS

A new paper has been published in the *British Birds* detailing a 30 year study of breeding merlins on four grouse shooting estates in the Lammermuir Hills in south east Scotland. This paper is the latest in a series of papers written by Scottish Raptor Study Group members reporting on the detrimental effects of intensive grouse moor management on several raptor populations.

The results of the Lammermuir merlin study suggest that illegal persecution is not thought to be a contributing factor in this population’s decline. Merlins are generally tolerated on UK grouse moors, as they are not seen as a big threat to red grouse. However, it is suggested that an intensification of grouse moor management in the Lammermuirs over the last ten years has probably had an impact on this merlin population, particularly an increase in the heather burning regime.

The authors recorded that only three hen harrier

broods throughout the study period, the last in 1994. There were at least three sites where peregrines attempted to breed in the early years of the study, the last successful one being in 1994. Buzzards are commonly seen in the Lammermuirs but only nest on the periphery of the study area, 'probably because all of the suitable trees that were used previously have now been removed.' Short-eared owl sightings were 'quite frequent' in the early study years and nests were occasionally found, but 'these casual observations declined as the years went by and became unusual during the later years.'

This long-term study was brought to an end after the 2014 breeding season. Good cooperation from landowners and gamekeepers was enjoyed during the early study years. However, in 2015, two of the four estates withdrew permission for vehicular access. *The Raptor Persecution UK* blog reported that one of the estates in question, the Hopes Estate, is owned by Robbie Douglas Miller, who runs the Wildlife Estates Scotland scheme which is administered by SLE to showcase the work that estates undertake to protect wildlife [Jul 15]. Hopes Estate was accredited in 2014.

See: Heavisides, A, Barker, A & Poxton, I (2017) Population and breeding biology of merlins in the Lammermuir Hills. *British Birds* 110: 138-154

HARE COURISING

Three men pled guilty at Selkirk Sheriff Court to a breach of the Protection of Wild Mammals Act (Scotland) 2002 by deliberately hunting seven hares with four lurcher dogs. The offence took place at Tollishill Estate near Oxton in the Lammermuir Hills.

VELVET ANTS

The Herald reported that the James Hutton Institute said that velvet ants (wasps with explosive stings) had been spotted three times in Aberdeenshire within the past four years. Previous sightings of the insect were in the Angus Glens 32 years ago. The sting it is not deadly to humans but the insects have the ability to kill cows.

GLASGOW EMISSIONS

A report, presented to the sustainability and the environment policy development committee of Glasgow City Council, showed that carbon emissions in Glasgow have been cut by more than a million tonnes since 2006. The amount of CO₂ in the city's air has fallen steadily to just under 3,000kt. The city's target is to cut emissions by 30% by 2020; a continuing minimum annual reduction of 0.58% is required. The largest decrease in emissions came from industry/commerce which reduced by 330kt compared to last year. Domestic figures fell by 196kt whilst transport fell by only 1,000 tonnes.

GREENSPACE

SNH has awarded £3m to five projects to improve local greenspace across Scotland. The funding comes from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and once match funding from other sources is added, will result in a total investment of £7.3m.

Three projects are in west Central Scotland at Clydebank, Castlemilk & Fernhill, and Cardonald. The other two are in Aberdeen – at Middlefield and Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. The projects are led by West Dunbartonshire Council, South Lanarkshire Council, Southside Housing Association, Aberdeen City Council and NHS Grampian. ERDF's Green Infrastructure Fund aims to transform some of Scotland's most deprived urban areas by developing and improving their greenspace, focusing on the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland.

RIVER TYNE

The River Tyne flows through East Lothian and into the sea to the north of Dunbar. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) is leading a project to help migrating salmon and sea trout, as well as lamprey and eels, return to the headwaters of the river. The river has been altered over the years, with many obstacles blocking safe passage for fish. As much as 90% of the habitat in the River Tyne and its tributaries is often inaccessible. Work is being funded through the Water Environment Fund which SEPA administers for Scottish Government.

NIGG BAY

RSPB Scotland has created new wildlife habitat at Nigg Bay reserve on Cromarty Firth in the Highlands. A new wetland area offers shallows for birds such as little grebes, mallards, herons, lapwings and curlews. The project has received funding from the Landfill Communities Fund.

CALGARY MACHAIR

A Justgiving appeal has been set up to raise £12,000 to erect fencing at Calgary beach on Mull during the summer to control sheep grazing and enable the regeneration of wild flowers on the machair. The Friends of Calgary Bay have been replanting grass and controlling erosion on the edge of the machair. Scottish Natural Heritage advised that a fence could be hidden in the dune systems to mitigate the visual effect.

CNPA

The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has published a new five-year plan which includes increasing woodland, restoring peatland, improving walking routes and red deer management policies, and providing 200 additional affordable homes. The proposals now go before the CNPA board, and will require ratification by Scottish ministers.

AN CAMAS MÒR

The *Badenoch & Strathspey Herald* reported that An Camas Mòr LLP has lodged an application with Highland Council to renew planning permission granted in principle for the new town on Rothiemurchus Estate near Aviemore [March 14]. The original permission lasted for three years; work has been continuing on the landscape and ecology masterplan, the recreation management plan and a funding package.

Supporting information within the extension application said: "The updated faunal surveys have confirmed the presence of sand lizards within the site, the relocation of a badger breeding sett and more extensive evidence for the presence of otter and pine marten. Apart from the sand lizard, not previously surveyed, no additional protected or notable species have been identified."

NNRs

SNH has joined forces with MyParkScotland to raise the profile of SNH's 30 National Nature Reserves (NNRs). MyParkScotland's website will list the reserves along with over 300 parks and greenspaces and allows feedback, suggestions and donations. More than 600,000 people visit NNRS each year. See: <http://bit.ly/myparksnh>

BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH

The 2017 RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch showed that house sparrows were top of the results, a position they have held since 2012. Starlings climbed up one place to second, pushing chaffinches down to third. Blackbirds and blue tits made up the top five. The survey recorded more waxwings than usually seen in Scotland because of a fail in the berry crop in Scandinavia. There

was an increase in other migrant birds such as the redwing and fieldfare, as the sub-zero temperatures on the continent forced them to go in search of milder conditions.

AUCHENCORTH MOSS

Midlothian Council has given Westland Horticulture approval for peat extraction at Auchencorth Moss on the Penicuik Estate in Midlothian over the next 20 years, in breach of local and national planning policies [Jun 16]

A Midlothian Council spokesman said: "Peat extraction at Auchencorth Moss was granted planning permission in 1986. This planning permission expires in February 2042. The recent application was to review the conditions attached to the original planning consent. However this review process places restrictions on the local planning authority and as a consequence it cannot restrict working rights such as to prejudice adversely to an unacceptable degree either the economic viability of the operation of the site or the asset value of the site.

"If it did so the council would be liable to pay compensation for loss of income. Midlothian Council has managed to secure the restoration of the site to a raised bog rather than to agricultural land as stated in the original planning permission. Furthermore, the applicant is also required to provide financial provision to secure the decommissioning, restoration and aftercare of the site."

The council said that it had tried to ensure 'the best possible outcome considering the restriction of existing legislation.' Planning officers said in a report to councillors: "The continued extraction of peat from this site will continue to have a deleterious effect on peatland. Large volumes are to be removed, and even with a successful restoration scheme, the reforming of peat stock is a slow process."

Dr Maggie Keegan, of Scottish Wildlife Trust, said: "It's incredibly disappointing that the destruction of peat bogs continues to be permitted while millions of pounds are being spent on their restoration elsewhere as part of Scotland's commitment to reducing carbon emissions. Approving this application also goes against national and local policies that are aimed at phasing out the extraction of peat for use in horticulture."

Aedán Smith, of RSPB Scotland, said: "It appears [the council's] hands have been tied by an archaic planning law ... It is vital that this loophole in the planning system that allows Scotland's fantastic peat bogs to be dug up in one part of the country whilst work is done to repair damage to them in another part is quickly closed."

SEPA said that the continuation of peat extraction for a further 24 years was 'inconsistent' with Scottish policy objectives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Auchencorth Moss Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is just metres from the proposed extraction site; SNH said that not enough was being done to safeguard the SSSI.



ENERGY

WIND POWER

WeatherEnergy data showed that wind turbines generated enough energy to cover two-thirds of Scotland's total electricity consumption in February. Scotland's total electricity consumption from homes, business and industry in February was 1,984,765 MWh. Wind turbines contributed 1,331,420 MWh of electricity to the National Grid over the same time. An increase in capacity and

stronger winds contributed to an increase of 43% on February 2016, when wind energy provided 929,417 MWh.

WINDFARM UPDATES

Dumfries & Galloway: Element Power has submitted a revised plan for a 12 turbine proposed windfarm at Windy Rig. The plan now includes layout changes and four fewer turbines. The site lies on the Moorbrock Estate, north of Carsphairn, and is near a cluster of other wind energy developments.

Scottish Borders: The *BBC News* website reported that a fourth phase of the Crystal Rig windfarm in the Lammermuir Hills, on the border with East Lothian is being considered. The proposal for a further 11 turbines would take the total number to over 100. 25 turbines became operational in 2003, when it was the largest onshore windfarm in Scotland. 60 more turbines were completed in 2010 with another six added in the third phase of the project.

- Scottish Borders Council (SBC) is being advised to approve LE20 Ltd's plans for eight wind turbines at Howpark near Grantshouse. A number of objections have been received highlighting that the area was previously said to have no further capacity for turbines. A report for the local authority said that the approval of other windfarms on appeal meant the 'prevailing character of the landscape' had changed.

- SBC has agreed to lodge an objection to Banks Renewables' 15 turbine, 51 MW Birneyknowe windfarm near Bonchester Bridge [Feb 17]. Planning officials had advised opposition due to its landscape, visual and cultural impact. The Scottish Government has the final decision.

FRACKING

The *Sunday Herald* reported that Ineos is planning to develop the Grangemouth petrochemical complex for fracking, founded on importing fracked shale gas from the US and opening up fracking in the UK.

The Ineos application to Falkirk Council envisages a 'fully integrated chemical science cluster' at Grangemouth by 2020. The company said that new sources of ethane from fracked shale gas will 'transform the site's competitiveness and manufacturing potential.'

Ineos started importing ethane by sea from fracking fields in the USA last year. It also has UK government licences to frack in central Scotland.

FLOATING WINDFARMS

Planning consent has been granted by the Scottish Government to Kincardine Offshore Windfarm Ltd's eight turbine 6 MW floating offshore windfarm, 15 km south east of Aberdeen. Once operational, the £250m project will have a generating capacity of 50 MW. The first turbine from the 'world's largest floating wind array' is expected to be on site in the second quarter of 2018.

- Hexicon AB's plan to install two floating wind turbines off the north Caithness coast has been approved by the Scottish Government. The demonstration project, 9 km out to sea from Dounreay, had already secured approval from Highland Council [Feb 17].

FRONTIER OILFIELDS

17 firms have been granted exploration licences in the Oil & Gas Authority's 29th licensing round, the first in two decades to focus solely on under-explored areas of the Rockall Basin, Mid-North Sea High and part of the East Shetland Platform [Feb 17]. The 'frontier' areas have been divided into 111 blocks, following the release of the UK government's seismic data from the seabed.

- Hurricane Energy has made what it has described as the 'largest single undeveloped discovery' of oil in UK waters within the Greater Lancaster area, 97 km west of Shetland. The company hopes to begin production in 2019 and said that there could be one billion barrels of recoverable oil.

Hurricane Energy has focused its efforts on naturally fractured basement reservoirs which occur in a series of drilling blocks west of Shetland. It is estimated that up to 20 billion barrels of oil equivalent remains under the North Sea and in the wider basin

GRANGEMOUTH HEAT & POWER

The *BBC News* website reported that BP has cancelled plans to build a new gas-fired combined heat and power (CHP) plant at Kinneil oil terminal in Grangemouth [Mar 16]. A renegotiated agreement with Ineos, the operator of the Grangemouth refinery and petrochemicals plant, means that the substantial investment required for a new Kinneil CHP plant will now not be required.



TOURISM & RECREATION

MENIE ESTATE

The *Herald* reported that the Trump International Golf Links at Menie, Balmedie has asked Aberdeenshire Council to abandon planning permission clauses that imposed strict, independent monitoring by the Menie Environmental Monitoring Advisory Group (MEMAG), which includes Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) [Dec 16].

Trump undertook an internal review of the work undertaken by MEMAG, its outcomes and its costs. A club spokesman said: "There was no evidence of MEMAG adding value to the environmental monitoring undertaken ... nor did MEMAG produce any policy, advice or guidance that added value to the role and conduct of the ecological clerk of works. The review had concluded that MEMAG was an 'unnecessary and disproportionate' development management tool for the development, and now wants to run its own annual inspections."

A SEPA spokesman said it had lodged objections to this application on the grounds of environmental protection and monitoring, which includes disposal of foul water, protection of habitat and private water supplies.

RUBHA REIDH ACCESS

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that Highland Council were adamant this week that members of the public have every right to use an access road to the Rubha Reidh lighthouse near Gairloch in Wester Ross [Jan 17]. The council's access officer, Phil Waite, stated that the owners, the McLachlans, were wrong to try to limit access as the right to roam was not limited to core paths. He said that their claim to privacy under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act was confined to land they owned and managed and could not be claimed for land they don't own or manage. He also stated that it is still not an offence to be on excluded ground.

The owners said: "Our solicitor wrote to the Highland Council, the Inverasdale Estate and Gairloch Community Council a couple of weeks ago to advise that he has taken authoritative Legal Opinion which confirms that the private road from Melvaig to Rua Reidh is not a public right of passage, that the Inverasdale Estate do not have the right to allow the public to take vehicle access

beyond Melvaig, and that we have every right to restrict access to our property.

"The ongoing dispute is clearly not helping the local area and tourism and, with that in mind, our solicitor has invited both Highland Council and the Inverasdale Estate to a meeting to discuss a possible compromise such that the public could have some limited access while protecting our business and privacy. The Highland Council have indicated that they would like to find a compromise; we have yet to hear from the Estate. I urged the community council to encourage the Estate and Highland Council to meet with us before the visitor season starts in earnest, with a view to coming to an agreement on limited access."

The owners said that they have an arrangement with police that officers will attend if they complain about unauthorised access. The right of access signs, erected by the community council on the road from Melvaig, have been removed by the owners. The lighthouse has now been put on the market by the owners.

FIFE PILGRIM WAY

The National Lottery has awarded £399,000 to the 70 mile long Fife Pilgrim Way, which begins at Culross Abbey or North Queensferry and finishes at St Andrews. The project should be complete by 2018. The Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum hopes to extend the Fife Way to a coast-to-coast route, linking St Andrews with Iona.



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

CROFTING COMMISSION

Crofters have elected six new commissioners to serve on the Crofting Commission Board. Former convener, Colin Kennedy, was not re-elected [see FARMING, Oct 17].

HIE

Economy Secretary Keith Brown said that Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE), Scottish Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland would continue with their own boards [Jan 17]. He also announced that a national strategic board would be set up. A new enterprise agency would be set up to cover the South of Scotland.

JOHN MUIR TRUST

Andrew Bachell, has been appointed as chief executive of the John Muir Trust (JMT).

RAMBLERS SCOTLAND

Ben Dolphin has been elected as President of Ramblers Scotland.

TREES FOR LIFE

Trees for Life is seeking support in raising £15,000 for its Bring Back the Beavers appeal, which will fund site assessments, work with local communities, and beaver habitat restoration work such as tree planting and natural regeneration. This will enable preparation of a formal application for a licence to re-establish beavers in the Highlands.

See: www.treesforlife.org.uk

SRUC

Sandy Cumming has been appointed as chairman of Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) from October.

UHI/CNPA

The University of the Highlands & Islands (UHI) and Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) have signed a memorandum of understanding which formalises a long-standing relationship. The two organisations work together on forestry, land use, conservation and outdoor pursuits.