








	CONSERVATION	1
	FARMING	3
	WOODLANDS	3
	FISHFARMING & FISHERIES	3
	MARINE	5
	POLITICS & PARLIAMENT	5
	GENERAL ENVIRONMENT	5
	ENERGY	7
	TOURISM & RECREATION	8
	NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS	8

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CONSERVATION

CAPERCAILLIE

RSPB Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) have conducted a national survey of capercaillie. It has been estimated there are 1,114 individuals, down from about 1,285 when the last national count was done six years ago [Apr 11]. The results are the second lowest on record; the population is half the size it was in 1993. Capercaillie are found in mature pine woodlands in the Cairngorms, Perthshire and Aberdeenshire with 83% of the population in Strathspey; numbers have been rising in the Cairngorms. There were around 20,000 across Scotland in 1970, but their steep decline has seen capercaillie included on the red-list of species of highest conservation concern.

The decline is attributed to low levels of breeding success – a wet June when the chicks hatch is bad for the birds; habitat loss and birds dying after flying into tree fences around forestry plantations. There is also growing evidence that human disturbance can be an issue as it causes capercaillie to avoid using large areas of otherwise suitable woodland – limiting the potential for population recovery.

Nick Wilkinson, of RSPB Scotland, said: “The considerable conservation effort that has been directed at capercaillie for over two decades now has helped to prevent further population decline, and indeed has made a second extinction of this species from Scotland less likely. The country’s capercaillie population has fluctuated between 1,000 and 2,000 birds since the first national survey in the 1990s, but it’s now very much at the low end of this scale. Capercaillie are restricted to only a few areas of the country and most are found in Strathspey, which highlights the importance of innovative conservation work in this area, in partnership with others, for their population to recover.”

Sue Haysom, of SNH, said: “Vital conservation work such as establishing rich feeding areas for adults and chicks, promoting woodland creation in the right locations to increase habitat, and carrying out targeted predator control around breeding sites has already brought benefits. Now we need to build on this with energy and innovative approaches developed by experts and local communities to ensure that future generations can experience this magnificent bird.”

An innovative five year initiative, the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project, is being developed. Led by the Cairngorms Nature Partnership, the scheme will work closely with National Park communities to build support for the conservation of capercaillie, as well as aiming to create bigger, better managed and better connected forests to support long-term survival of capercaillie and other species in pine woods. Andy Ford, of Cairngorms Nature, said: “People are key to securing the future of capercaillie in the National Park. We want to empower people to be inspired to get involved. The project implements the Cairngorms Capercaillie Framework, a blueprint for a strategic approach to saving the capercaillie from going extinct in the UK through targeting future management at a landscape scale. We hope to develop a programme of conservation action to support the long-term survival of the species and provide a model to

save ‘at risk’ species in National Parks around the world.”

DEER MANAGEMENT

The Scottish Government is to take action to improve practices to manage wild deer, protect habitats and help biodiversity [May 17]. It will urge the deer sector and SNH to do more to improve deer management planning, with progress to be reviewed in 2019 to consider if a fundamental change is needed. It will ensure that SNH take a tougher approach to dealing with non-cooperative landowners, using the full range of enforcement powers at its disposal. SNH is to bring forward powers for the first time that would instruct landowners to keep deer populations at certain levels to protect fragile habitats or face a £40,000 fine.

An independent group will be set up to look at deer management issues, including a separate panel to look at lowland deer management. Current intervention powers will be tested before making further legislative changes.

Roseanna Cunningham, the Environment Secretary, said: “While some progress has been made in the management of our wild deer following recent changes to legislation and through the work of the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), we know further improvements are needed to minimise the costs of deer road vehicle collisions and replacing fencing, as well as reducing the environmental impact.”

Richard Cooke, of ADMG, said: “The upland deer sector is committed to progressive change and will work with other interests in developing and implementing new approaches to deer management which plays an important role in the rural economy and rural employment in the remoter parts of Scotland. Thus we welcome the Cabinet Secretary’s decision to set up an independent group to support the deer sector as it moves forward.

“We are pleased to note the Cabinet Secretary’s recognition in her statement of the progress made by the deer sector over the last two years, particularly as this was somewhat understated in the 2016 SNH Report [Nov 16]. Deer Management Groups, having adopted new deer management plans which take account of all relevant aspects of the public interest, are now turning their attention and efforts to setting up systematic habitat monitoring across the upland deer range. Hopefully this will result in a more informed debate on the habitat impact of deer along with other herbivores, especially sheep, rather than focusing on deer numbers and densities alone, as has mostly been the case in the recent review process.

“We agree with the Cabinet Secretary that more legislative action is not necessary at this time and support her direction to SNH to use existing statutory powers as a back stop for the voluntary approach in situations where deer management is falling short. We have no difficulty with a more assertive approach by SNH but will expect any such last resort action to be justified on the basis of firm evidence.”

Alex Hogg, of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, said: “Rushing to new powers when existing ones had never been tested would have been problematic, especially when SNH was

granted fresh powers last year under land reform legislation. The measures announced focus on using and enforcing existing legislation, which is, in our view, a logical approach. Challenges remain in deer management and [this] announcement targets areas where more effort and different approaches are required, such as in lowland Scotland and in urban fringes where there is a growing roe deer population."

Bruce Wilson, of the Scottish Wildlife Trust, said: "This bolder approach to deer management is long overdue. The voluntary agreements that have been used to date have failed to halt the decline in many habitats, particularly woodland, that is caused by overgrazing. We need to work at a landscape scale across Scotland to reduce deer numbers to sustainable levels, so we welcome the tougher approach that will be taken by SNH if landowners do not cooperate. The new independent working group on deer management needs to have a clear focus, and look beyond red deer to consider the growing impacts of other species including roe."

The Herald reported that there are an estimated 587,000 to 777,000 wild deer across Scotland with about 100,000 culled annually; the number of red deer is said to have tripled over the past 50 years. According to Forestry Commission Scotland, the cost of damage caused by deer to plantations and other commercial woodlands is £4.5m every year.

Dr Paul Dolman, of the University of East Anglia, said that there has also been a 50% decline in woodland bird numbers where deer are present.

ASSYNT DEER

The Herald reported that the Assynt Crofters' Trust (ACT) is facing claims that they have failed to control deer numbers on its estate in northwest Sutherland. SNH said that the deer are threatening ancient woodland and regeneration efforts and wants the crofters to sign a voluntary deer control agreement. The crofters have refused so far and the SNH could order a cull. The trust said that the consequences could be financially devastating both for the trust, which could face a fine of £40,000, and the wider community as valuable stalking income would also be lost.

ACT claims that SNH officials have misrepresented the position to the SNH board.

The Ardvar area has some the most northerly remnants of native oak in the British Isles. It is a Special Area of Conservation and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. ACT has planted almost 2,500 acres of native broadleaf trees on its land. The John Muir Trust, owners of the neighbouring Quinag Estate, has already called for a deer cull to protect the trees.

ACT said that SNH had made two significant errors in their assessment of the risk to the environment; the woods had been wrongly designated as an oak wood, instead of a birch wood, when there are 'only a mere scattering of individual trees, possibly less than ten in total.' SNH's habitat survey identifies a total of three oak seedlings out of 8,800 sampled, a tiny fraction of 1%. SNH officials had also refused to acknowledge that the pressure from deer is far less than claimed.

Ray Mackay, of ACT, said: "There is considerable movement of deer, particularly in bad weather, across the A894 to the lower and more sheltered ground of the Assynt peninsula. This is categorically denied by SNH officials, who tell their board that the Assynt deer herd is a stable and closed entity, despite their own helicopter counts telling a different story. They refuse even to heed their own evidence. We find

ourselves facing the threat of a Section 8 Control Order and a £40,000 fine, not to mention having to pay for the SNH contractors who would come on to our land and kill our deer."

62 deer were shot by crofters last year, providing a revenue of almost £9,000 after expenses. He said this was a vital income stream for ACT, in its work to retain its population, by employing local people and offering bursaries to young people from the area. Under SNH's plan there would be an annual cull of 25 stags.

A SNH spokesman said: "Our role is to help local deer groups across Scotland to work together to reduce damage to the environment, reduce fencing costs and road accidents whilst also protecting local jobs. On the Assynt Peninsula, after two years of negotiations, the Deer Management Group finally reached agreement on a plan to reduce deer numbers last summer. This plan was endorsed by SNH but the plan was not delivered. Wild deer roam freely across Assynt and the agreement of all 12 members of the group to the plan is essential and is what we will continue to encourage. If any members of the group refuse to sign up to the plan we will need to consider using the intervention powers given to us by Parliament."

BEAVERS

Trees for Life discovered the presence of beavers on a river near Beaully in Inverness-shire. Film from camera traps set by the charity clearly show the presence of a mother and at least two young kits. Trees for Life informed SNH of their presence and made a case to the Environment Minister, Roseanna Cunningham, that the beavers be allowed to stay where they are, or failing that, moved upstream into Glen Affric, above the Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin hydro dam on the basis that they would have minimal impact on land use.

However, Ms Cunningham said that the animals had been released illegally and must be captured and removed [Dec 16]. She said: "We have been clear that we are minded that beavers can remain in Scotland and that their range can expand naturally. But the unauthorised release of beavers is a criminal offence and will damage the beaver reintroduction project. That is why I am asking SNH to take swift action in the Beaully area. We must avoid a repeat of the experience on Tayside."

Alan McDonnell, of Trees for Life, said: "It is disappointing that government is already starting the process of trapping this family without considering other options. Whilst we understand that the minister wants to address the concerns of landowners in Tayside, the situation here is very different. We think it is possible to consult and negotiate with landowners in the immediate vicinity of the family and upstream to find an alternative outcome for the animals. We think these beavers have been active at this site for at least five years without any local concerns being raised. Which just goes to show that in the right location, beavers and other land use interests can co-exist successfully."

Trees for Life asked that the animals either be allowed to stay where they are, or be relocated to another part of the Highlands, but not kept in captivity.

The *BBC News* website reported that SNH has been trying to establish the exact number of beavers in the Beaully area but numbers are still unknown. An SNH spokesman said that, once trapped, the beavers would be moved but it was not yet known when, or where they would be moved to, or what period of quarantine would be involved for health checks.

The Save the Free Beavers of the Tay group is campaigning against the trapping of the Beaully beavers. Louise Ramsay, a spokesperson for the group, said: "The beaver family in the Beaully is not causing any problems and is popular with locals (although some fishermen have complained about them for no obvious reason). They did not come from illegal releases so there is no need for SNH to make an example of them. It is clear they were genuinely accidental escapes from one or both of two possible private collections. The beavers have been there for five years or more and are breeding. Kits have been seen this year.

"Trees for Life are fundraising to run a licensed beaver project in that area and would like to study and add to the existing beaver population. Without this it could take decades for beavers to disperse naturally to the north of the Cairngorms. Trapping these beavers is a waste of public money and a pointless animal welfare risk; if SNH were to spend money on moving beavers they should concentrate of the 'beavers in conflict' in Strathmore."

A 38 Degrees petition, *Save the beavers of Beaully Scotland*, is being sent to Roseanna Cunningham asking her to reverse her decision to trap the beavers and to let them remain and allow scientific study and monitoring.

- A Stirling University study, *Using Ecosystem Engineers as Tools in Habitat Restoration and Rewilding: Beaver and Wetlands*, looked at the effects a group of beavers had on a wetland in Tayside originally drained for farming. The study is the first to measure the environmental benefits of the beavers' activity over time.

The research, carried out over 12 years, found that plant richness rose by 46% and the number of different plants recorded more than doubled. Species which normally grow in areas with high nitrogen levels decreased, indicating a return to more natural soil conditions. Between 2003 and 2015, the beavers constructed 195 metres of dams, 500 metres of canals and an acre of ponds at the site on a private estate in Blairgowrie, Perthshire, surrounded by a mosaic of vegetation which increased in complexity by 71%.

The study highlighted the 'exceptional' ability of beavers to rebuild diverse wetlands. It states: "Our study illustrates that a well-known ecosystem engineer, the beaver, can with time transform agricultural land into a comparatively species-rich and heterogeneous wetland environment, thus meeting common restoration objectives."

Professor Nigel Willby, of Stirling University, said: "Wetlands are tremendously important environments for biodiversity. They also serve to store water and improve its quality – they are the 'kidneys of the landscape.' However, the world's wetlands are disappearing at an alarming rate. The latest estimates suggest that almost two-thirds have been lost since 1900. Beavers are renowned for their engineering skills, like dam building, and are now being considered as tools for restoring wetlands. They have been reintroduced widely, including in Scotland, partly for this purpose and our findings demonstrate the surprisingly large benefits they can bring to biodiversity."

Lead author of the study, Dr Alan Law, said: "We know lots about the benefits of beavers in natural settings, but until now we did not know the full extent of what they can achieve in present-day landscapes where restoration is most needed. Wetland restoration normally involves raising water levels, for example by ditch blocking, plus mowing or grazing to maintain diversity. Beavers offer an innovative, more hands-off, solution to the problem of wetland loss – provided their populations are suitably managed and protected. Seeing what beavers can do for our wetlands and countryside highlights the diverse landscape we have been

missing for the last 400 years.”

The study was part-funded by SNH and published in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*. SNH will use the findings of the study to inform discussions about how beavers can be integrated within the Scottish countryside.

ST ABBS GANNETS

The first northern gannet chick ever to be seen at the National Trust for Scotland (NTS)'s St Abb's Head National Nature Reserve has been recorded. Up until the spring of 2016 there had only been three occasions in the last 30 years or so when gannets had been seen settling down on the cliffs at St Abb's Head. Last year, for the first time on record, gannets attempted to nest, but nothing came of it. This year, around 70 gannets arrived earlier in the season, but most of the birds left, leaving three pairs of birds which have been sitting on nests on a stack.

Liza Cole, of NTS, said: “With Bass Rock, the world's largest breeding colony of gannets just a few miles up the coast, full to capacity, I suspected it was only a matter of time before gannets started checking out the cliffs at St Abb's Head for suitable nest sites. Over the last 20 years seabird numbers at St Abb's Head have declined from 80,000 to just under 45,000 birds, reflecting UK wide declines. The only species that have maintained their numbers have been guillemots and razorbills. The stack on which the gannets have chosen to breed is a favoured breeding area for guillemots, so I fear that as gannet numbers increase, as they are bound to, the guillemots will be pushed out. This feels very much like a pivotal moment for the seabird colony at St Abb's Head, and only time will tell what will happen in the years to come.”

Dr Richard Luxmoore, of NTS, said: “NTS has been monitoring the rise and fall of seabird numbers at St Abb's Head for over 30 years, and this is the beginning of a new chapter in the story. Most seabirds species are declining in number but gannets are bucking that trend, with numbers increasing by over 30% in the last ten years or so. Declines in other species of seabirds have been linked to lack off food brought about by overfishing of sandeels and climate change. It is thought that because gannets can travel great distances, up to 500 km, from their nest site to forage and because they are adaptable in what they eat they rarely encounter food shortages.”

UPLANDS VISION

SNH has published a report for Scottish ministers, *Scoping a Strategic Vision for the uplands* [Feb 17]. The report explores the multiple benefits the uplands provide, including how they help to reduce the impacts of climate change, and summarises both SNH's work and the views expressed in consultation.

The report states that any vision should be developed collaboratively and should be concise, focused and inspiring, with the greatest possible consensus and support of stakeholders. See: <http://bit.ly/2ubYUUU>



FARMING

GREENING

The Scottish Government has written to NFU Scotland, confirming that the regulations associated with the Greening element of farm support will be changed [Feb 17]. From 2018, maintenance on drains in Ecological Focus Areas (EFA) fallow will be allowed up to 15 March annually with further flexibility for exceptional circumstances such as exceptional rainfall and flooding in the remaining period. This is subject

to the caveat that drainage activities ‘do not jeopardise the biodiversity objective of the EFA.’ Currently, drainage work is not permitted on EFA fallow from 15 January to 15 July.

Farmers will also be allowed to establish EFA fallow on land claimed the previous year on the single application form as temporary grassland in year five, giving greater flexibility. In 2016 and 2017, only land declared as temporary grass in years one to four could be claimed. These requirements will be in place for the 2018 scheme year.

Andrew McCormick, of NFU Scotland, said that the common sense improvements will still deliver on all the environmental and biodiversity requirements set by Greening, but allow greater flexibility in the management of EFA fallow land.

RAASAY BARLEY

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that a barley growing trial has been held on Raasay, off Skye. R&B Distillers wanted to establish whether it would be possible to grow and ripen barley suitable for whisky making as part of its build project on Raasay. The Bere, Kannas and Iskira varieties ‘look like’ they are going to ripen early, whereas Concerto, the usual commercial variety, and Tartan are thought not likely to ripen. R&B Distillers hope that crofters on Raasay, Skye or Lochalsh will grow enough local barley to produce a single malt from 100% local grown barley.



WOODLANDS

LUGGIEBANK

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) has received £43,981 funding from Viridor Credits Environmental Company, through the Scottish Landfill Communities Fund, for improvements to Luggiebanks Wood Wildlife Reserve near Cumbernauld. A path upgrade, installation of new gates and information boards and a new wildlife pond will be undertaken. The reserve is part of Cumbernauld Living Landscape, which aims to enhance, restore and reconnect green areas of the town.

GREENOAKHILL

Phase one of Forest Enterprise (FE) Scotland's Greenoakhill development, east of Glasgow, has been completed. Greenoakhill landfill site has been transformed into an urban community woodland. It is a long-term partnership project between FE Scotland, Patersons of Greenoakhill, Land Trust and Central Scotland Green Network Trust. 100 hectares of the landfill and recycling site will be fully restored.

TIMBERLINK

The TimberLINK service, which transports 90,000 tonnes of Argyll timber each year to processors in Ayrshire by ship, is to continue for a further five years [Mar 16]. Around 900,000 lorry miles are removed from the public road network.

Supported by the Strategic Timber Transport Fund, the new £800,000 contract will run until April 2022, and delivers environmental benefits throughout Argyll. The level of forest cover in Argyll is twice the Scottish average and the area produces around 15% of Scotland's timber. However, limited local processing capacity means that much of this has to be transported to markets outside Argyll.

SHERIFFMUIR

Forestry Commission (FC) Scotland has approved the planting of 62 hectares of woodland on moorland at Sheriffmuir, near Dunblane [Dec

16]. Calls have been made for the battle site to be preserved as a national war grave. Objectors, including the Scottish Battlefield Trust, have contacted the Scottish Government to try to halt the planting by Kippendavie Estate, which is due to begin later this summer.

FC Scotland said that an original proposal for 78 hectares of woodland had been ‘extensively amended’ after feedback gathered over four years. Cameron Maxwell, of FC Scotland, said: “The revised scheme will both protect the key landscape characteristics of the battlefield and help to enhance and augment the site for visitors, with improved interpretation and access. As the project develops, detailed archaeological survey work and reporting will be a good opportunity to increase public engagement with the site and hopefully improve knowledge about the battle.”

HEART OF SCOTLAND

The Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership has been launched which consists of the John Muir Trust, Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust, FE Scotland, Dalchosnie & Kynachan Estate, SWT and the Woodland Trust Scotland. The partnership plans to restore native woodland across 50 km² between Lochs Rannoch, Tay and Tummel in Highland Perthshire. Funding has come from the April Trust and the European Outdoor Conservation Association.



FISHFARMING & FISHERIES

SEA-LICE

The *Sunday Herald* reported that the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO) has lodged a formal complaint with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), accusing it of trying to ‘delegitimise’ emamectin, a sea-lice pesticide [Jun 17]. SSPO complained that SEPA failed to consult the industry on a scientific report pre-publication, which suggested tighter environmental quality standards for the future.

An interim position statement by SEPA, dated May, proposed a tightening of the rules governing the pesticide ‘to the extent that practically useable quantities are unlikely to be able to be authorised.’ This was replaced by a revised statement in June with much weaker interim standards. Emamectin use in a small minority of ‘susceptible’ protected areas would be restricted, but for the majority of fishfarms there would be no change.

Scott Landsburgh, of SSPO, said: “No business can operate successfully in this sort of chaos. If the Scottish Government and its agencies want to deter investment, put jobs and economic benefit in jeopardy this is certainly the right way to go about it. SEPA has introduced immediate regulatory changes with no consideration of the social and economic impact despite being legally required to do so. If this sort of chaotic regulation starts then we can expect to lose our market share, which will undoubtedly have a negative impact on investment, loss of jobs and economic benefit to Scotland. Scottish salmon is Scotland's and the UK's number one food export supporting over 8,000 jobs, mostly in the Highlands & Islands where there are few alternatives. Working to strict environmental standards, we produce a healthy, high quality food, which has a growing market across the UK and in 60 countries worldwide.”

He criticised the SEPA report for basing its research on impacts suffered by a non-native species in freshwater, though salmon mature in seawater.

Guy Linley-Adams, of Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland (S&TCS), said: “SSPO has

a track record of these strange outbursts. It can behave as if it believes its members have a divine right to damage the marine environment. This is clearly an industry under pressure. It knows its position is untenable and it is lashing out ... SEPA has again been forced to bow to Scottish Government and industry pressure to weaken its plans for controlling emamectin and the damage that it is causing to the marine environment. It is becoming clearer by the day, including to SEPA staff, that the only realistic sustainable solution is closed containment fishfarming, where the farmed fish are biologically separated from the wider environment."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "Aquaculture must be sustainable and industry leaders have acknowledged that ensuring fish health and limiting environmental impacts must be a top priority. Any proposals to regulate the use of chemicals are a matter for SEPA."

Richard Luxmoore, of the National Trust for Scotland, said it was unclear why SEPA had altered its interim position on emamectin. He said: "The environmental limits that SEPA has proposed would effectively end its use in open cage fishfarms and bring widespread benefits to marine life."

Terry A'Hearn, of SEPA, confirmed that SEPA had weakened its interim controls because it had decided that they would be 'disproportionate.'

• *The West Highland Free Press* reported that Donald Cameron MSP tabled a series of questions to the Scottish Government about sea-lice treatment. He asked for information on the decision-making process which concluded that the in-feed treatment, SLICE, could continue in use. Mr Cameron asked what funding the government had provided for research into emamectin, what communication it had received from the industry on its use, what role the government had in SEPA's decision and if a ban were to be introduced, would it be on a phased basis?

FISHFARM MORTALITIES

The Herald reported that S&TCS claimed that mortalities of farmed salmon, as a percentage of total production, have almost doubled in the last four years. More than 41 million fish died during 2015 and 2016.

Andrew Graham-Stewart, of S&TCS, said: "We fear consumers are in the dark both about the welfare of the farmed salmon, but also the environmental impact of the fishfarms producing these fish. The alarming incidence of parasites and disease on the fish farms, which causes many of these mortalities, also has major implications for wild fish, particularly the huge numbers of juvenile sea-lice released from the farms into the sea lochs where they infest wild salmon and sea trout. The shocking level of mortalities apparent across the industry, including on RSPCA Assured farms, casts severe doubt on whether RSPCA Assured is much more than a fig leaf, both in terms of the welfare of the farmed fish and the wider environmental performance of the fishfarming industry."

S&TCS called for the RSPCA Assured scheme to be suspended pending an open review. The accreditation requires farmers to take 'reasonable steps to minimise the gravid lice population' and 'minimise the likelihood of disease outbreaks.'

SSPO dismissed the sea-lice 'crisis' insisting that critics of aquaculture 'often with their own motivations, publishing data without context, cannot be judged as any kind of independent authority.' Scott Landsburgh, of SSPO, said: "The industry will continue to do all we can to minimise unnecessary mortalities in the face of

changing environmental circumstances beyond our control, such as the effects of global climate change on the environment where we grow our fish. It is the responsibility of the salmon farming industry to meet these challenges head on and ensure we continue to have a sustainable industry in Scotland which protects the environment whilst maximising the economic and social benefits of the sector in the areas where we operate and that is exactly what we are trying to do."

SALMON TRACKING

A Scottish Government research project is to catch 750 salmon off the north coast of Scotland; they will be acoustically tagged and released back into the water. A network of receivers will be deployed around the country to detect where those fish then go. The study will look to find out how coastal fisheries link to different rivers, as well as increasing understanding of salmon homing behaviour and breeding spots.

The Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, said: "While a number of historic tagging studies have shown that fish captured in coastal nets at one location have then been recaptured in nets much further around the coast, our knowledge of how they came to that point is still very limited. This new study will look to provide us with further insight into this iconic species' behaviour which will help to determine whether we are striking the right balance between conservation and the interests of those who fish for salmon and what further action might be needed to protect stocks for future generations."

Fisheries Management Scotland, with District Salmon Fishery Boards and Fisheries Trusts, have deployed 60 acoustic receivers around 26 Scottish rivers. More detailed surveys of rivers will be undertaken in the autumn.

Anglers are encouraged to be on the lookout for tagged Atlantic salmon; the external tags should be returned to Marine Scotland (details on the tag).

PINK SALMON

Pink (humpback) salmon have been found in the River Ness, thought to be for the first time; one was also caught on the Helmsdale River in Sutherland. The Russians introduced thousands of pink salmon to the Barents Sea from Alaska and Canada in the mid 1950s; the Inverness salmon may have originated from there. Over the past ten years, some have successfully bred in rivers in Norway and Iceland. The invasive fish competes for the same food as the native wild Atlantic salmon. S&TCS said: "If they do begin to colonise and breed over here, it would create a major problem for native salmon which are not doing very well as it is, in terms of numbers."

The *BBC News* website reported that Professor Eric Verspoor, of the Rivers & Lochs Institute at Inverness College UHL, said that DNA tests would confirm if the fish were humpback salmon. He said: "It might be argued by some that another salmon species might be desirable in Scotland's rivers. However, the potential for negative impacts on native species and the fact that they are the least desirable of the Pacific salmon from an angling and commercial fishery perspective suggests there are unlikely to be any positives from their doing so.

"The fact that they are running up Scottish rivers is worrying as that suggests a spawning intention – the species normally spawns from July to October across its native range. Furthermore, the numbers of pink salmon caught in UK rivers appears to be on the increase over the last decade. What would be interesting to know is whether the fish caught encompass males and females, and

whether they are reproductively mature or not. It is a situation which should be closely monitored in respect of the threat it poses to Scotland's native salmon, given the latter's great socio-economic value and biological uniqueness."

ORKNEY FISHING PATTERNS

The Pentland Firth & Orkney Fisheries Data Collection project, a four year research study, ran until the end of 2016. 13 fishing vessels were equipped with electronic navigation systems to plot details of fishing grounds, routes to the grounds and species caught. More general information was gathered from the wider fishing fleet through observer trips and voluntarily supplied log books.

The study sought to identify the key areas and spatial patterns for the Orkney creel fishery and to record this information in a way that would make it accessible to marine stakeholders. The database will be used to help inform marine planning as well as consent applications for marine energy projects. The project will also be used to support certification of Orkney shellfish as a sustainable resource.

The Crown Estate, Orkney Islands Council, Marks & Spencer, Orkney Sustainable Fisheries and Marine Scotland funded the project.

SHELLFISH

The Association of Scottish Shellfish Growers and Crown Estate Scotland have funded research to see if collaborative investment 'loch-wide' might contribute to the growth of small shellfish operations in Scotland. The study is being carried out by Poseidon Aquatic Resource Management. It results from observing the growth, over the last 15 years, in Shetland's mussel production whilst Scottish mainland and other isles' production has stagnated, fluctuating between 1,500 and 2,500 tonnes. Shetland now accounts for 77% of Scottish farmed mussel production; the relatively rapid expansion may result from the uptake of under-used, pre-existing aquaculture sites.

COMMON SKATE

Loch Sunart to the Sound of Jura Marine Protected Area (MPA) was proposed by the Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network (SSACN) and designated by the Scottish Government in 2014 to help protect the common (flapper) skate. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) and SSACN are working together on a project looking to see if individual common skate can be identified by the spot patterns on their backs. The species has suffered large declines in population numbers over recent decades and is included on Scotland's list of Priority Marine Features for conservation action. All common skate captured in Scottish waters must be released unharmed.

Research so far has focused on an archive of more than 400 photographs taken between 2011 and 2016 by a local angling charter boat skipper. From these photos, over 200 individual skates have already been identified.

SNH would like to hear from anglers who have photos of skate captured in or near the MPA to add to the photo catalogue. Being able to identify individual fish will eventually enable the size of the skate population in the MPA to be estimated, and how this changes over time. If the general area where the skate was caught is known, changes in distribution can be studied and the position of the MPA boundary can be assessed.

Contact: skates@sams.ac.uk; <https://skates.sams.ac.uk>

FISH STOCKS

The annual advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) has been published which helps to inform the fisheries

negotiations that take place in the autumn to decide how much quota fishermen will receive in the coming year.

This year's advice takes into account changes to discard levels resulting from the phasing-in of the landing obligation over the past two years. Some stocks like Norway lobster and haddock are already fully phased; some like North Sea cod and whiting are partially phased; and others like saithe will be increasingly incorporated in 2018.

The latest scientific advice includes advised increases for North sea cod (27%), whiting (34%), Norway lobster (7%), saithe (7%) and haddock (30%), while there are advised reductions for other stocks such as hake (-4%).

See: <http://www.ices.dk>

NORTH SEA COD

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) said that independent assessment of stocks had shown that North Sea cod is now sustainable and fully traceable and can be eaten with a 'clear conscience.' The fish has been considered under threat after stocks fell to 36,000 tonnes in 2006. Cod stocks in the North Sea peaked at 270,000 tonnes in the 1970s. After the 2006 low, the fishing industry began work with the Scottish Government and the EU Fisheries Council to agree a cod recovery plan. The industry agreed measures to help regenerate the population, including modified fishing gear, catch controls, well-managed fishing practices and closing spawning areas to fishing.

However, WWF warned that the amount of North Sea cod at breeding age is well below late 1960s levels and recovery remains fragile.

LONDON CONVENTION

The UK government has given two years' notice of its intention to withdraw from the London Fisheries Convention, which allows vessels from six European countries to fish between six and 12 miles from the UK coast. British vessels will lose the right to fish in waters belonging to the other countries which signed the convention: France, Belgium, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands.

Fisheries Secretary, Fergus Ewing, said: "The UK government's decision to withdraw from the London Fisheries Convention is a move we have been pressing for some time now. Our priority is to protect our fishing industry and allowing unrestricted access to our waters to remain through this convention clearly would not be doing that."

The EU Common Fisheries Policy allows, in addition to the London convention, vessels from all EU countries to fish beyond the 12 mile limit.

Environmental campaigners have expressed caution about the regulation of fishing once the UK leaves the current international framework.

Will McCallum, of Greenpeace UK, said: "For years, successive UK governments have blamed Brussels for their own failure to support the small-scale, sustainable fishers who are the backbone of our fishing fleet. If Brexit is to herald a better future for our fishers, the new UK Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, must keep the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto commitment to re-balance fishing quotas in favour of small-scale, specific locally based fishing communities."



MARINE

NORTH SEA WILDLIFE

Environmental group, Oceana, is to undertake a two month survey of the North Sea, using the *Neptune*, a ship equipped with an underwater robot. The ship sailed from Edinburgh to Aberdeen before sampling in Norwegian, Danish,

German and English waters. The seabed will be scanned, and samples of fish and fauna taken. The project is to assess the impact of the fishing and oil industries on the North Sea and is funded by £2.2m from the Dutch Lottery. See: www.oceana.org

SEAWEED

Highlands & Islands Enterprise has commissioned a study by the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) to assess the viability of wild seaweed harvesting as a green cash crop for fishermen. Seaweed is increasingly used in several products, including food and pharmaceuticals. Opportunities for growth in the market in Scottish waters will be examined. The availability of kelp and whether harvesting on a larger scale would be viable will be assessed.

Maps covering Scotland's coasts will be created to assess the overall quantities of seaweed. Divers and seabed video will be used to survey sites and estimate potential yields for harvests. The growth and recovery of seaweed after harvesting will be studied, as well as assessing the sensitivity of other species that depend on seaweed for their habitat to ensure that seaweed removal can be managed sustainably. An investigation will be made of how the activity can be effectively licensed.

- SAMS has established the genetic code of *Porphyra umbilicalis*, laver, which is one of the world's most valuable commercial seaweeds. Farmed seaweed is 'extremely susceptible' to disease; the breakthrough will help to breed a disease resistant crop.

NATIONAL WHALE & DOLPHIN WATCH

The Sea Watch Foundation's annual whale and dolphin watch is taking place until 6 August. Scientists and volunteer observers have been reporting on cetaceans for over 40 years. During the 2016 event, 374 sightings were logged around Scotland.

See: www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk/nwdw



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

AIR POLLUTION

The *BBC News* website reported that MSPs have launched an inquiry into air pollution [see GENERAL ENVIRONMENT below]. Graeme Dey, convener of Holyrood's Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform committee, said: "Not only can poor air quality impact our natural environment and wildlife, but it is also bad for our own health and is especially harmful for the young, elderly and people who already have heart and lung conditions. In fact, recent evidence suggests air pollution may be a contributory factor to 15,000 early deaths in Scotland each year. As part of our new inquiry, the committee wants to hear whether Scotland is doing all that it can to tackle toxic gases and how this fits into the overall plans to cut pollution within the UK and EU."

WILDLIFE CRIME

Mark Ruskell MSP lodged Parliamentary Questions about the Crown Prosecution office's decisions to drop five wildlife crime prosecutions in recent months [May 17]. He asked the Scottish Government about the recourse available to the public if it is believed that the Procurator Fiscal has not considered all of the evidence when making a decision whether or not to proceed with a case. The Lord Advocate replied that a victim has the right to ask for a review of the decision, taking new information into account. Mr Ruskell also asked if the alleged crime is against an

animal, bird or the environment who can advocate for a review of the prosecutor's decision?

ULVA BUY-OUT

The North West Mull Community Woodland Company Ltd (NWMWCW) has applied to the Scottish Government to exercise the community right to buy the island of Ulva under land reform legislation. The island, off the west coast of Mull, has been put on the market for £4.25m by Jamie Howard. There are six permanent residents.

Roseanna Cunningham, the Land Reform Secretary, has allowed this to be treated as a late application, as an interest in the island was not registered before it was put on the market. The sale will be suspended for eight months to allow the community to raise the money and complete the process laid down in the legislation.

NWMWCW has put housing at the heart of its plan to regenerate Ulva: bringing existing housing stock, whether occupied or not, up to modern standards; bringing derelict structures into use including existing farm buildings; creating plots for affordable housing for rent and/or self-build and creating crofts/small holdings. The NWMWCW also has a range of plans for economic development from green energy to tourism, fishing and agriculture to forestry.



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

PLANNING

The Places, People & Planning position statement for homes and infrastructure projects has been put forward by the Scottish Government [Jan 17]. An extensive consultation exercise on planning reform has taken place. The position statement and accompanying Strategic Environmental Assessment Report, which sets out the environmental impacts of the proposed changes, are open for consultation until 11 August. See: <http://bit.ly/2tttdr2G>

WILDLIFE CRIME

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that Police Scotland said that an investigation has been launched into the alleged illegal setting of traps to deliberately target birds of prey near Auchintoul in Strathdearn, Inverness-shire. A buzzard was found after having been illegally trapped on the south slopes of Beinn Bhreac. The bird was found by a member of the public and was released.

MOUNTAIN HARES

The charity, OneKind, has published *Mountain Hare Persecution in Scotland* which outlines concerns about the scale of culling taking place on Scottish grouse moors. Landowners carry out culls from August, saying that they are necessary to protect game, such as grouse, from disease. OneKind said that about 40% of the hares killed were shot for sport while about 50% died as part of organised culls.

OneKind estimates that there are between 175,000 and 500,000 mountain hares in Scotland; an SNH study estimated that 25,000 mountain hares were killed in 2006/7, which it understood to be between five and 14% of the population. The report said: 'Population data is sparse but suggests that mountain hares are in decline.' The mountain hare is a protected species, and the government is responsible for maintaining the population in favourable conservation status.

The report provides a summary of what is known about mountain hare persecution and emphasises how little is known about the impact of this apparently legal slaughter on the conservation status of the mountain hare population. The report

also provides information about 25 companies that offer mountain hare killing as an activity, eight of which are promoted by the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group; VisitScotland and SNH are partner organisations in the group.

The report details recent calls from a range of conservation organisations asking for a moratorium on the culling until the impact on the hare population can be properly assessed. The Scottish Government has mostly focused on making a plea for 'voluntary restraint' which OneKind said has been ignored by the grouse-shooting industry.

The report makes a series of recommendations including the introduction of complete protection of mountain hares within Scotland's National Parks, prohibiting mountain hare killing except under licence all year round, and strengthening and bringing transparency to the licensing arrangements.

Harry Huyton, of OneKind, said: "Mountain hares are an iconic species in Scotland that should be protected. Our report shows that instead they are persecuted in enormous numbers for entertainment. This killing is unregulated, and there are no guarantees that it is not further driving the decline of these species or causing unacceptable suffering. OneKind is calling on the Scottish Government to take urgent action and introduce a moratorium on large-scale hunts and culls before the season gets into full swing.

"I hope that Visit Scotland and SNH share our surprise and displeasure with what we have revealed in our report. It's simply not appropriate for government agencies to actively promote the large-scale recreational killing of native wildlife, and I am writing to both agencies today to ask them to remove their endorsement of the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group and businesses that offer these services."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "We have been very clear that we will not tolerate large-scale culls of mountain hares, but we recognise that numbers need to be controlled in some specific circumstances. Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, has already announced that the Scottish Government is setting up an independently-led group to examine the sustainability of grouse moor management, which includes mountain hare culling. We are also commissioning research into the costs and benefits of large shooting estates to our biodiversity and economy."

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

• OneKind asked for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to take urgent action to end the cull of mountain hares within the National Park. 8,625 people signed a protest and a further 500 people sent individual calls to the park authority for the culls to stop.

FOX HUNTING

The *BBC News* website reported that two members of the Jedforest Hunt in the Scottish Borders were convicted at Jedburgh Sheriff Court for deliberately hunting a fox with dogs. They were fined £400 and £250 respectively. It is the first conviction of a traditional fox hunt under the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002 [Apr 02]. The men plan to appeal against the decision. David McKie, defence lawyer, said that the men had worked within the terms of the legislation by using hounds to flush out a fox from cover to waiting guns.

Robbie Marsland, of the League Against Cruel Sports Scotland, supplied covertly-filmed video footage to the trial. He said: "Today's guilty verdict is the first successful prosecution

for mounted fox hunting in Scotland and while we're delighted with the outcome, and our role in this, we remain of the view that the law needs strengthened. The Scottish Government has committed to consult on the hunt ban following a review by Lord Bonomy, who clearly stated there was evidence of lawbreaking by Scottish hunts." [Jan 17].

The Countryside Alliance said that the huntsmen had been subjected to 'trial by television.' It said that footage, which had been given to the BBC, had put pressure on police and prosecutors to take the case forward.

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog commented that the video evidence was accepted as admissible by both the Crown Office and by the court, unlike the hen harrier shooting on the Cabrach [May 17].

SALMON HEADS

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that several hundred salmon heads were fly-tipped in the Allt a' Mhuilinn burn, near Ardvassar on Skye. The salmon heads would appear to have been processed and their origin is not known at this time. The rotting remains have been removed and it is feared that there could be a significant environmental impact on the burn. The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) has been informed.

FAIRY POOLS

Minginish Community Council has submitted plans to Highland Council to extend the carpark at the Fairy Pools, near Glenbrittle on Skye [May 17]. The carpark currently has space for 30 cars; an additional 157 spaces would be created. Compost toilets would also be provided on the site.

KINGUSSIE FLOODS

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that the Kingussie flood alleviation channel agreement has been signed with Pitmain Estate. High flows will be diverted from the Allt Mor into Loch Gynack, where it will be released at a controlled rate back into the River Gynack, contributing to the Allt Mor hydro scheme. The work, jointly funded by Highland Council and the estate, is expected to be completed this year.

AIR POLLUTION

The *BBC News* website reported that ClientEarth is to take legal action against the UK government in the High Court, for failing to comply with a court order to produce a plan to bring air pollution across the UK within legal levels as soon as possible. It claimed that plans to tackle air pollution in the devolved nations are inadequate and unlawful, with little detail and no evidence of concrete actions [May 17]. The UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that the draft clean air strategy does set out steps for the devolved institutions.

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "We have already sought to shape the UK government's plan with our Clearer Air for Scotland Strategy, which sets out ambitious actions designed to secure further improvements in Scotland's air quality." [see POLITICS above]. Air quality is a devolved matter but ClientEarth said that the UK, as EU member state, was deemed responsible for enforcing legal pollution limits.

James Thornton, of ClientEarth said: "The draft plans for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are simply plans for more plans. The court ordered a plan for the UK government to obey the law on pollution limits across the UK as soon as possible. The health of all UK citizens is at stake, not just some." He said that the Cleaner Air for Scotland Strategy is way behind schedule and no new measures to combat air pollution have been

proposed since last year. The Scottish Government says that it will consult on a National Low Emissions Framework during 2017; a final plan ought to be in place by the 'end of July.'

HILLTRACKS

Scottish Environment LINK's Hilltracks sub-group wrote to the Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, requesting that scope of the study by the independently-led group into the environmental impact of grouse moor management practices also considers the very significant environmental damage and detrimental landscape impact caused by the construction of hill tracks [May 17]. Many such tracks are closely related to the growing intensification of grouse moor management. LINK has built up a considerable case history portfolio which shows the detrimental visual impact of poorly constructed and maintained tracks which would be made available to the expert group.

• In his *parkswatchscotland* blog, Nick Kempe identifies a new bulldozed track at the head of Glen Prosen on the Glen Isla Estate, within Wild Land Area 16, Lochnagar & Mount Keen. It does not appear on the Cairngorms National Park Authority planning portal and it therefore would appear to have been constructed without planning permission. There is a presumption against development in wild land areas. There are also 'temporary' hydro access tracks at Glen Clova and Glen Prosen.

WILD CHALLENGE

RSPB's 2016 Wild Challenge survey of almost 15,000 people showed that hedgehogs were seen in 57% of Scottish gardens or outdoor spaces last year, being absent from 27% of gardens. Moles were unseen in 44% of outdoor spaces. 2% of gardens recorded great crested newts. 64% of the respondents spotted at least one fox in gardens or outdoor spaces during the year.

OPENCAST MINE RESTORATION

The *Herald* reported that Hargreaves planned to use untreated sewage sludge at a disused opencast mine at the Dalquahandy site near Coulbourn, Lanarkshire to re-establish soils and encourage plant growth in the restoration of the site. Having had a public consultation, the company dropped its plans following objections from the local community.

SEABIRD TRACKING

Glasgow University fitted satellite tags to more than 1,300 seabirds from 29 colonies around the UK and Ireland, to help assess the potential impacts from offshore windfarms *etc* and determine where Marine Protected Areas should be. The five year study tracked four species of seabirds – shags, kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots – once they left their breeding colonies to catch fish at sea. The data was used to create a computer model for each species to predict important areas at sea for other colonies where no tracking took place, estimating where birds travelled from some 5,500 breeding sites. The birds used 600,000 square miles of sea, and all four species use Scotland's coastal waters. Kittiwakes and shags are red-listed, whilst razorbills and guillemots are amber-listed. This study provides, for the first time, a full map of the feeding areas for some of the most important seabird species.

Breeding density, fine-scale tracking and large-scale modeling reveal the regional distribution of four seabird species by Ewan Wakefield *et al*, is published in *Ecological Applications*.

POT BEETLE

Buglife Scotland has rediscovered a six spotted pot beetle at Kirkconnel Flow National Nature reserve, near Dumfries, and the ten spot, at the Black Wood of Rannoch in Perthshire. The last pot beetles were recorded in Scotland 17 years ago. The finds were

made as part of the tenth anniversary celebrations of Buglife Scotland. Two other scarce pot beetles, the two-spotted version and the black birch, have also been found. Only a few individuals were identified at each site, in limited areas of suitable habitat, but management plans are being prepared for landowners to try to protect and grow the populations.

GREENSPACE

Ordnance Survey has updated its Scottish Greenspace map. The digital map shows all accessible leisure and recreational greenspace, including parks, playgrounds, public gardens, playing fields allotments and community areas. Scotland has 1,112 km² of urban green space. 13.5% of Glasgow's total area is accessible green space; Edinburgh has 9.3% and Aberdeen, 8.1%. The map is available through the OS Maps app: www.os.uk/osmaps

POLLINATOR STRATEGY

The Scottish Government has set out a ten year Pollinator Strategy to halt the decline of bee and butterfly populations. The number of pollinating insects in Scotland, including bees, butterflies and hoverflies, has declined by an estimated 51% since 1980, which could have a negative impact on farming, food security, the economy and human health. The main threats to wild pollinators, which include bumblebees, hoverflies and butterflies, come from intensive agriculture, habitat loss, and the use of pesticides including neonicotinoids.

Proposals include the greater use of green urban infrastructure, like rooftop gardens; the restoration and creation of habitats rich in flowers; development of bee and butterfly-friendly pesticide control and new research into the impact of climate change on pollinators.

Bruce Wilson, of the Scottish Wildlife Trust, said: "Pollinators are a vital part of Scotland's landscape. Many of our native wildflowers, shrubs and trees would be unable to exist without them. Bees and hoverflies also provide the backbone for much of Scotland's agriculture, contributing around £43m to the economy each year. In particular, we welcome the focus on a landscape scale approach to help species like bumblebees recover from serious decline.

"We have successfully demonstrated this approach through the Irvine to Girvan Nectar Network, a project that has created large areas habitat for several rare insects along Ayrshire's coastline. Intensive agriculture is another key threat so we welcome further support for integrated pest management to encourage farmers to reduce the use of harmful chemicals. However, while we also support the continued precautionary approach to harmful neonicotinoid pesticides we would still like to see a total ban on these chemicals, especially given the increasing amount of scientific evidence pointing to their harmful impact on pollinators."

The strategy was developed by SNH, together with the Bee Farmers Association, the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates. See: <http://bit.ly/2u18aek>

COMMA BUTTERFLY

The comma butterfly was in severe decline in the 20th century and had become restricted to south east England and parts of the Welsh borders. The UK population has now increased by 138% over the past 40 years and the comma has colonised parts of Scotland.

Richard Fox, of Butterfly Conservation, said: "The comma is clearly responding to climate change, which is driving its spread northwards. We have seen this in a number of other species that

have spread up from England in to Scotland, but the comma is by far the most dramatic example. It now has spread not only through the whole of northern England but up through the Scottish Borders and Lothians, through Fife and Angus. It is now on the outskirts of Aberdeen and has been spotted in recent years near Inverness. Commas have become less dependent on hop and started to specialise on other things, particularly on the stinging nettle. Climate is driving the change but the comma has only been able to achieve this amazing spread north because it has become more specialised on stinging nettles, which are very widespread."

MOSSMORAN AIR POLLUTION

The *Sunday Herald* reported that the ExxonMobil and Shell plants at the Mossmorran petrochemical complex in Fife suffered a 'process upset' which led to unplanned, intermittent gas flaring over several days. The plants regularly discharge large amounts of gas from their stacks.

SEPA has launched a major legal investigation into the flaring. Rob Morris, of SEPA, said: "It was prolonged, it was very unsatisfactory and we're investigating potential breaches of the permit. We will be looking at the permit conditions that apply to these operators with a view to taking action." Actions could include formal warnings or undertakings, enforcement notices, fines or prosecutions.

SEPA received over 80 complaints about the flaring and said that it was 'currently satisfied that the emissions from the Mossmorran complex are not having a detrimental impact on air quality in the local communities; national and EU air quality objectives are being met.

NHS Fife said that the black smoke emissions appeared to breach one of Mossmorran's operating conditions, and had been linked to breathing difficulties and irritated eyes.

The Mossmorran Action Group pointed out that residents had been suffering noise, pollution and health impacts for 32 years, and called on the Scottish Government to hold a full independent investigation into the cumulative social and environmental impacts of the ageing Mossmorran plant. Shell said that the intermittent flaring had been within legal pollution limits.

INVERNESS CASTLE RABBITS

The *BBC News* website reported that Highland Council is to survey rabbit warrens below Inverness Castle and also examine the effects of planted trees on the bank's stability. The castle currently serves as Inverness Sheriff Court. Highland Council owns part of the castle and will convert the whole building into a tourist attraction once the courts service moves to a new location in Inverness.

GOLDEN PLOVER AWARD

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that the Fearann Eilean Iarmain estate on south Skye won the 2017 Golden Plover Award for Moorland Management. The award is run jointly by the Heather Trust and Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust Scotland. The award recognises the part played by the estate in protecting the natural environment and wildlife, including ground-nesting birds. The late Sir Ian Noble took over the estate in 1972 and established an ethos of environmental conservation, establishing one of the first native woodland regeneration schemes in Scotland.



ENERGY

RENEWABLES

WWF Scotland analysed data provided by Weather Energy which showed that there was a record amount of wind power generated in the first six months of 2017. Turbines provided 6,634,585 MWh to the National Grid, equivalent to 57% of Scotland's electricity needs. Wind turbines provided 1,039,001 MWh of electricity in June, equivalent to the electricity needs of 118% of Scottish households.

WESTERN ISLES INTERCONNECTOR

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that a debate was held at Westminster concerning the funding mechanism which would allow windfarm developments on the Western Isles to go ahead. A subsidy is required for the £800m inter-connector across the Minch which is required to export the electricity to mainland markets. The proposed subsea cable has been in discussion for ten years. Richard Barrington, of the UK Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, said that a decision would be made 'very shortly.'

WINDFARM UPDATES

Dumfries & Galloway: Planning officials have advised refusal for Burcote Wind's ten turbine Longburn windfarm near Cairnsphairn, due to 'adverse cumulative landscape impacts.' Mountaineering Scotland said that it would form a 'ring of steel' around Cairnsmore of Carsphairn.

Fraser Campbell, of Burcote, said: "While the recommendation is based on landscape and visual and cultural heritage impacts, we have had no objections from either Scottish Natural Heritage or Historic Environment Scotland. We have been working on the site for over five years now and worked closely with the communities over the years to ensure that our application is well designed and suited to the site." Councillors have deferred a decision on the proposed windfarm, pending a site visit.

East Ayrshire: The Scottish Government has given consent to Vattenfall for the 50 turbine South Kyle windfarm between Dalmellington, Patna, New Cumnock and Carsphairn, on the border with Dumfries & Galloway, following a public inquiry.

OFFSHORE WIND

Four offshore windfarms were given planning approval by Scottish ministers in 2014. The decision was challenged in the courts by RSPB Scotland, which won its initial legal bid after arguing that the Inch Cape, Seagreen Alpha and Bravo and Neart na Gaoithe developments threatened seabirds. Ministers appealed, and the ruling was overturned.

The Inner House of the Court of Session has now refused RSPB Scotland's application to appeal against that decision at the Supreme Court [Jun 17]. RSPB Scotland is now to decide whether to apply directly to the Supreme Court.

Anne McCall, of RSPB Scotland, said: "While disappointed by the Court of Session decision it is not wholly unexpected. We will now take time to consider the details and determine our next steps. The existing consents, if implemented, could have a significant impact on Scotland's breeding seabirds but we are hopeful that by continuing to work with all the developers we will be able to reduce those impacts."

SHETLAND TIDAL

Nova Innovation is to lead the EnFAIT [Enabling Future Arrays in Tidal] project to extend the Bluemull Sound tidal energy farm from two

to six or more turbines [Aug 16]. The EU is contributing £13.1m through its Horizon 2020 project. Nova will head a consortium of nine industrial, academic and research organisations from across Europe on the project, which runs from July 2017 until June 2022.



TOURISM & RECREATION

NORTH HARRIS SNORKEL TRAIL

The North Harris Snorkel Trail showcases six beaches and bays where snorkellers can see a variety of marine life including crabs, jellyfish and starfish. The self-led trail has been developed by Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) in partnership with the North Harris Trust as part of the SWT's Living Seas programme. It is supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the National Marine Aquarium. SWT set up the North West Highlands Snorkel Trail in 2016 [Jul 16].

See: <http://bit.ly/2ukM6w0>

SCENIC AREA VISITS

A YouGov poll, commissioned by the John Muir Trust (JMT), found that 55% of Scots are 'less likely' to visit scenic areas in Scotland with large developments such as commercial windfarms, pylons and superquarries. 26% said that these developments would make no difference to their decision and they would still go, while 3% said they would be 'more likely' to visit because of them. 10% of those surveyed were undecided and 6% expressed no interest in visiting scenic areas at all. There is a slight increase in people deterred by the developments, with a 4% rise in those less likely to visit compared to 2013 and a 2% drop in the same period in those who said it would make no difference.

JMT called on the Scottish Government to use the forthcoming Planning Bill to safeguard Wild Land Areas from industrial-scale development, similar to the protection already in place for windfarms in National Parks. Andrew Bachell, of JMT, said: "Visitor expenditure in Scotland's National Parks alone is worth £187m a year, with further revenues brought in by tourism businesses in scenic areas from Shetland to the Borders. So when a clear majority of people say they'd be put off visiting scenic sites like wild land areas by the existence of large-scale windfarms, giant pylons, superquarries and other inappropriate commercial developments, policymakers have to pay attention, before it's too late."

CAIRNGORMS ACCESS

Ramblers Scotland has called on the owners of the Kinrara Estate, south of Aviemore, to remove three newly locked electronic gates which block access to part of the Speyside Way. The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) is investigating the gates as a possible breach of public access rights.

Brendan Paddy, of Ramblers Scotland, said: "We fully support the CNPA in their efforts to tackle these gates, which should never have appeared in the first place. It's extremely disappointing that a public body is having to spend time and money on such an avoidable problem, and that access remains blocked during the peak summer season. We call upon Kinrara Estate to remove the gates now, so that tourists and residents can once again exercise their access rights, join the Speyside Way and enjoy the natural beauty of the Cairngorms National Park."

Murray Ferguson, of CNPA, said that the estate had a history of being 'not particularly positive' about access [Sep 15]. He said: "The

landowners may have a perfectly good reason for putting these gates there, but they normally would be expected to make provision for people to go around one side on foot or on a bike. We have written to the estate to find out why they have put up the gates in this way. If need be we can use the legislation to force them to remove these gates, but we would rather find another solution. No reply has yet been received."

GLENTRESS FOREST

Forest Enterprise (FE) Scotland and Forest Holidays are submitting a planning application to Scottish Borders Council for 56 eco-cabins, new mountain bike trails and a walking route in Glentress Forest in the Tweed Valley. Forest Holidays will provide private sector investment of £10m for the project with the remaining £1.3m from FE Scotland.

HARRIS MARINA

The *Stornoway Gazette* reported that Harris Development Ltd has been awarded £300,000 from the Coastal Communities Fund, completing the £1.35m funding package required to create the Harris Marina Hub. The project has been granted a Local Management Agreement by The Crown Estate. The hub is expected to bring significant economic benefits to the area through the development of marine tourism.

It will complete a chain of pontoon facilities at Stornoway, Lochmaddy, Lochboisdale and Castlebay which will help to consolidate and enhance the Outer Hebrides as a premium sailing and cruising destination. As well as visiting yachts, cruisers and cruise ships, the pontoons will also provide opportunities to develop a range of tourism-related businesses such as sea-angling and wildlife tours. Safe access to the water will also help to develop East Loch Tarbert as a haven for recreational boaters and a centre for the provision of marine skills training and education.

LOCH LOMOND NATIONAL PARK

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) statistics show that 2,272 permits were issued in the first 118 days of the camping byelaws, in operation since March [Feb 17]. This equates to a combined total of 19 permits a day for motorhomes and tents; very low compared with the previous numbers of people enjoying staying in the Camping Management Zones. Before the ban, the national park estimated that up to 800 tents were pitched within its boundary on busy weekend. LLTNPA announced changes to its bye-laws after four months of operation.

As part of the scheme, campervans were charged to stay overnight at lay-bys. LLTNPA has now accepted that this was a mistake, and said that it has made refunds to those affected. In a statement, LLTNPA explained that it would 'no longer provide permits for motorhomes to stay in lay-bys' because Police Scotland had agreed to use road legislation to deal with 'irresponsible use of motor vehicles in lay-bys.'

Nick Kempe, in the *parkswatchscotland* blog, said: "Having spent three years promoting the camping bye-laws to local communities and politicians as the only way to prevent vehicle encampments in lay-bys, the park authority has done a u-turn and admitted the police already had all the powers necessary. Their attempt to limit the places where campervans could stop and then charge them for doing so was in complete disregard of traffic law. It was also quite bizarre because they made no attempt to charge caravans for stopping in exactly the same places."

Gordon Watson, of LLTNPA, said: "We are greatly encouraged by the overwhelmingly

positive response from locals and visitors alike to the major improvements which the permit system has introduced. We remain committed to ongoing monitoring and review of the new system to ensure its long-term effectiveness and benefit to the park."

Brendan Paddy, of Ramblers Scotland, said: "We welcome the park's decision to stop charging motorhome owners to stay at lochshore laybys and instead use existing laws to tackle anti-social behaviour. We urge the park leadership to adopt a similar approach to manage camping in tents. Given the worryingly low number of permits issued, we fear the bye-laws are making it harder for responsible campers to enjoy the park – particularly people from poorer backgrounds. We are also concerned that the hassle, cost and insufficient number of permits may be displacing campers to other areas with fewer resources to support visitors. A National Park should be a showcase for Scotland's world leading access rights but instead campers have fewer rights in prime spots within Loch Lomond & The Trossachs than anywhere else in the country. We do not want to see these restrictive bye-laws renewed when they are reviewed in 2020."

See: <http://bit.ly/2t8uoxT>

MENIE GOLF COURSE

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) has formally objected to the Trump Organisation's plans for a second golf course at Balmedie, near Menie in Aberdeenshire. SEPA is concerned about the risk of pollution and sewage at the new course and raised concerns about proposals to plant non-native plants near one of the holes. An up-to-date environmental management plan has not been submitted.

A spokesman for Trump International Golf Links said that the second course would be south of the existing one and not within the Site of Special Scientific Interest.



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

HWDT

The Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust has been awarded almost £200,000 from the Coastal Communities Fund for a network of 25 whale watching and heritage sites across the west coast.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF RURAL ADVISERS

A National Council of Rural Advisers has been announced by the Scottish Government. The 13 member panel will devise policy recommendations for agriculture, rural development and funding mechanisms for beyond 2022.

Rhoda Grant MSP has written to Fergus Ewing, Rural Economy minister, asking for Highlands & Islands and crofting representation on the board. A Scottish Government spokesman said that the council would seek the views of a wide range of stakeholders across rural, coastal and island communities..

SNH

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has appointed Francesca Osowska OBE as chief executive. She is currently a Scottish Government director on a secondment to the UK government's Scotland Office and takes up post on 1 October. Ian Jardine, who has been the chief executive for 15 years, is to take up a new role as adviser to the Scottish Government on environment policy to strengthen its EU-related analysis, engagement and policy work.

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