

Wild Land Area 34 and what's at stake

Summary of our campaign

In 2015 we launched our Area 34 campaign to stop three giant wind farms – Glencassley, Sallachy and Caplich - being built in Wild Land Area 34 in the far north of Scotland. These industrial-scale developments would destroy wild land there, and approval would have made a mockery of recent steps by the Scottish Government to protect areas officially recognised in 2014 as important national assets.

Our Area 34 campaign received tremendous support and we were delighted when the Scottish Government refused the Glencassley and Sallachy wind farms towards the end of 2015. But a decision is yet to be reached on Caplich and we need your help to keep the pressure up. A Public Local Inquiry is due to take place in mid-2017 and the final decision will be taken after this by the Scottish Government.

Read on to find out more about Area 34, the background to our campaign, and to find out about the threat that remains from Caplich wind farm.

What and where is Wild Land Area 34?

1. Wild Land Area 34: Reay-Cassley (WLA34) lies in the far north of Scotland, taking in nearly 56,000 hectares from the A837/near Lairg in the south east, Ledmore Junction in the south west and up to Scourie/Laxford Bridge in the north.
2. It is one of 42 areas in Scotland identified by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) in June 2014 as the most extensive areas of high wildness in Scotland and important in the national context. The Wild Land Areas were identified following public consultation and following a detailed analysis of where wildness can be found across all of Scotland's landscapes. SNH is expected to publish detailed descriptions for each of these areas soon.
3. WLA34 takes in a range of types of landscape. It includes part of the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area where the scenery has been described as “unparalleled in Britain” and where “steep hills with idiosyncratic profiles rise from hummocky surroundings in some of the most rugged and spectacular scenery in Scotland.” See <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/B699728.pdf>
4. Wild Land Area 34 also includes lower and less obviously spectacular terrain that is highly significant in international nature conservation, such as two areas of the Caithness & Sutherland Peatlands Special Protection Area (SPA), in itself part of the largest and most intact area of blanket bog in Britain. Blanket bog is rare in world terms and Britain has a significant proportion of the total world resource. These peatlands, and the surrounding moorland and open water, are of international importance for conservation because they support a diverse range of rare and unusual breeding birds. This is why the area includes Special Protection Areas and Special Conservation Areas, designated in recognition of their importance to species such as otter and birds such as black and red-throated diver, golden eagle, golden plover, dunlin, greenshank, short-eared owl and hen harrier.

5. The area also includes Sites of Special Scientific Interest, particularly for special geological significance such as karst landscape (a special type of landscape formed by the dissolution of soluble rocks, including limestone and dolomite), and vascular plants, along with Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance) for greylag goose, dunlin and also blanket bog.
6. You can read more about Wild Land Areas, see an interactive map and zone in on Wild Land Area 34, on the Scottish Natural Heritage website <http://www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/looking-after-landscapes/landscape-policy-and-guidance/wild-land/mapping/>

How are Wild Land Areas protected?

7. Wild Land Areas are not an actual landscape designation, unlike National Parks and National Scenic Areas. However, in June 2014 the Scottish Government made several commitments to wild land in its new planning policy:-
 - *“Our principal physical asset is our land” National Planning Framework 3, para 4.2*
 - *“Scotland’s landscapes are spectacular contributing to our quality of life, our national identity and the visitor economy ... we also want to continue our strong protection for our wildest landscapes – wild land is a nationally important asset.” NPF3, para 4.4*
8. Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) is explicitly linked to the SNH Wild Land Areas map in relation to wind farm development. SPP specifies that wind farms may be appropriate in Wild Land Areas in certain circumstances and only where it can be demonstrated that any significant effects on the qualities of these areas can be substantially overcome by siting, design or other mitigation. (Scottish Planning Policy para 166. Table 1: Spatial Frameworks <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00453827.pdf>).
9. In advice to the Scottish Government at the time of publication of the Wild Land Areas map, SNH said that “the map of wild land areas should be considered a useful and important strategic tool in decision making.” (Source: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1323989.pdf>)

Why Wild Land Areas are so important to the future for nature

10. We believe that Wild Land Areas need protecting for what they are now – the most significant and extensive wild places in Scotland, vital national assets in this respect. They are also a place of opportunity where nature could truly thrive through a process of “rewilding.” This process would involve the restoration of damaged ecosystems (for example, through managing deer numbers to allow native woodlands to regenerate), restoring natural processes and possibly reintroducing lost species to create a richer, wilder environment. Wild Land Areas are important therefore as places where this step-change to bring back the full diversity of our natural heritage could take place.

How Wild Land Areas can help not just nature but also people

11. Protecting Scotland’s Wild Land Areas would benefit not just nature, but also people and communities. Protecting wild land and rewilding does not mean excluding people, imposing unwanted policies on rural communities or damaging people's livelihoods but it does represent an opportunity to help some of our fragile rural communities in our most remote areas to start to thrive again. This is happening in other parts of Europe where nature has been encouraged to flourish, and where a range of new and sustainable enterprises have developed as a result in areas such as woodland management or nature tourism etc.

The threat to Wild Land Area 34

12. Three major wind farm proposals have threatened to damage Wild Land Area 34 and wild land beyond – Sallachy, Glencassley and Caplich. Together, these could have seen 65 turbines up to 132m high – nearly one and a half times the height of the Statue of Liberty - which could be visible from iconic peaks such as Stac Pollaidh and Ben More Assynt.
13. There was fantastic news in November 2015 when the Scottish Government announced it had refused consent for the Glencassley and Sallachy wind farms. However, Caplich is still to be decided, leaving the fate of this area still in the balance. This is the development which is the furthest west and which would impact significantly on views from Ben More Assynt.
14. The John Muir Trust is committed to policy principles that support the current targets of the UK and devolved governments for greenhouse gas emissions reduction. These are the primary public policy tools directed at climate change mitigation. However, we do not support the construction of industrial-scale wind energy developments on wild land areas. Apart from the intrinsic value of wild land, we do not think the evidence supports such developments being built on wild land to deliver emissions targets. In particular, much of the wild land in Scotland is peatlands and protecting such areas keeps carbon locked in the ground. There are ways to meet climate change targets without destroying our wildest places forever, such as energy conservation measures and small-scale, sensitively-sited renewable energy developments.

Wind farms can provide local communities with generous community benefit funds. Why would you deny them this opportunity for increasing their economic sustainability?

15. Windfarms are an issue where the potential to divide local communities is huge. Communities are split over the benefits of wind farms – the large sums of money offered by way of community benefit funds are certainly attractive but the jury is out over whether these will lead to economically sustainable communities in the longer term. For example, if the area is perceived to be less attractive as a result of an industrial-scale wind farm, tourist numbers may drop with a resulting impact on local businesses and people employed in the tourism industry. The John Muir Trust argues the developer should not have a role in deciding how that community money is distributed. On a broader level there is also an issue about the way in which wind farms are incentivised, with money taken off all electricity consumers - including those in fuel poverty - for subsidy.

Wind farms and tourism

16. Scotland's landscapes are vitally important to our tourist industry, often underpinning the local economy in remote, rural areas. In 2013 the John Muir Trust YouGov poll on commercial wind farms and tourism found that 51 per cent of people in Scotland would be 'less likely to visit a scenic area which contains large-scale developments (e.g. commercial wind farms, quarries, pylons).' This compares to just 2 per cent who say they would be 'more likely' to visit a rural area with such visible structures, ie for every tourist who might be enticed into an area by the presence of wind turbines, another 25 will be deterred from visiting that same area.
<http://www.johnmuirtrust.org/latest/news/251-poll-warning-to-tourist-industry>
17. The Scottish Government-commissioned Moffat Report on wind farms and tourism is often quoted as if it gives evidence that supports a position that "wind farms don't put tourists off." However, this is not in fact what it says. For instance, even at the time that report was researched (data gathering from 2005), at a time when there was little wind farm development, the Report noted the potential

for a negative effect if development was sited on the most sensitive areas:—

“There is often strong hostility to developments at the planning stage on the grounds of the scenic impact and the perceived knock on effect on tourism. However developments in the most sensitive locations do not appear to have been given approval so that where negative impacts on tourism might have been a real outcome there is, in practice, little evidence of a negative effect.”

Why it is so important to defend Wild Land Area 34/Wild Land Areas

18. Over the last few years, the Scottish Government has made ground-breaking progress by adopting the new Wild Land Areas map of Scotland, and recognising wild land as an important national asset in planning policy. It is vitally important that planning decisions support this positive direction of travel in policy to protect wild land.
19. The Wild Land Areas map was published as recently as 2014. The Scottish Government’s recognition of the wild land qualities of Wild Land Area 34, by rejecting Sallachy and Glencassley wind farms, was very encouraging. However, if it were to approve Caplich, it would damage Wild Land Area 34 and undermine the principles of the Wild Land Areas map.
20. There are a number of precedents for refusing Caplich - in August 2014, the Scottish Government refused an application for a similar wind farm at Glenmorie in Easter Ross because of unacceptable visual and landscape impacts, whilst in 2015 it refused the Beinn Mhor, Limekiln, Allt Duine and Carn Gorm wind farms. More recently, however, the Scottish Government approved the Creag Riabhach wind farm - not far from Caplich and partially within a Wild Land Area - so the potential for Caplich to be approved remains. Caplich is going to be the subject of a Public Local Inquiry in 2017, and the Scottish Government will reach a final decision after this has taken place.

How you can help

Our Area 34 campaign received tremendous support in 2015 and we were delighted when the Scottish Government refused the Glencassley and Sallachy wind farms. But the fate of Area 34 is still uncertain and we need your help to keep the pressure up for the right decision to be made about Caplich.

Make sure you have signed up to receive our e-newsletter so we can keep you up to date with the latest news about the forthcoming Caplich Public Local Inquiry and any actions you can take (for example, writing letters to the press about the importance of protecting wild land).

Visit our website www.johnmuirtrust.org

For further information/contact details

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