

PE1383/R

22nd May 2013

David Stewart MSP

Convenor
Public Petitions Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr Stewart,



Chief Executive
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PE1383: BETTER PROTECTION FOR WILD LAND

I am writing ahead of the 28th May meeting of the Public Petitions Committee, at which Paul Wheelhouse, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change and Derek Mackay, the Minister for Local Government and Planning, will give evidence in connection with the John Muir Trust petition PE1383: Better protection for wild land. We have now also had an opportunity to review the 10th May letter from Ian Jardine, Chief Executive, Scottish Natural Heritage, to the Committee, in which he provides the further information requested by the Committee at its 16th April meeting.

There has been considerable media attention and discussion on the future for Scotland's wild land in the past few weeks, following publication, on 30th April, of proposals for the third National Planning Framework (NPF3) and draft Scottish Planning Policy (SPP), as well as the Scottish Natural Heritage map of core areas of wild land in Scotland. As you are aware, publication of this map is significant in the context of our petition.

The Minister has cited the current review of Scottish Planning Policy and the National Planning Framework as an opportunity for people to make known their views on the approach that should be taken within the planning system to safeguard areas of wild land character and other sensitive landscapes. The Trust will be working with its members and supporters and other interested landscape bodies and we look forward to sharing our views..

In his introduction to Scotland's Third National Planning Framework Main Issues Report and Draft Framework, Derek Mackay MSP, Minister for Local Government and Planning states:-

"Scotland is special, with a high quality environment and many special places to live in and visit. These physical assets – natural and cultural – underpin our economy and our quality of life."

The Trust welcomes the recognition now accorded to wild land character as being a national asset in the consultation documents but believes that planning policy alone is not sufficient to ensure its protection. It also misses the many positive opportunities afforded by a designated status. Indeed, we specifically disagree with the Scottish Government's comment in NPF3 consultation draft, Question 2, that "Scottish Planning Policy already safeguards areas of wild land character". We note that Highland Council has, just yesterday (21st May), raised no objection to another two large wind developments on wild land areas, as defined by SNH, and despite objections on wild land issues from SNH.

We are therefore concerned to see that the draft planning documents make it clear that the Scottish Government is not persuaded by the case for a new statutory designation, and also an apparent failure to recognise that the protection of wild land is about more than protecting against inappropriate wind development:-

"Ministers do not intend to legislate for new environment designations in Scotland, and core areas of wild land would not be designated under statute. However, we think the SNH mapping can inform future planning for wind farm development."

Our petition was driven by the urgent need to put in place a robust framework that will ensure the protection of Scotland's best wild land from *current and future threats*. Large-scale wind developments represent the current dominant land use change (see for example, Scottish Natural Heritage Natural Heritage Indicator "Visual influence of built development", updated 13 May 2013 which shows the area of Scotland from which wind turbines are visible increased by 79% between 2008 and 2010). The scale of this change could not have been anticipated and there are other examples such as the rapid expansion in the 1970s to 1990s of commercial, monoculture forestry on blanket bog – now recognised as inappropriate development driven at the time by large financial subsidies. This is why we have been campaigning for a designation, to recognise the value of wild land and ensure its protection for future generations.

We are pleased to see that:- *"... plans should identify and safeguard areas of wild land character. This should be based on SNH mapping of core wild land, published in 2013 ..."* The identification by Scottish Natural Heritage of "core areas of wild land" is welcomed and, on the mainland, broadly reflects our own assessment of where Scotland's wildest land is located. However, it is not clear from SPP and NPF3 drafts what "safeguards" will actually exist and whether this will give sufficient clarity to local authority planning bodies to defend wild land through the planning system, given that the core areas of wild land do not have the statutory protection of National Parks or National Scenic Areas.

Whilst some aspects of the draft consultation documents, particularly the use of the core wild land areas map, are a significant move forward, there are other aspects which could mean that wild land is developed very quickly. Core areas of wild land are not being allocated the same status as National Parks and the Trust would maintain that they should be.

A new designation would not only protect wild land from inappropriate development, but would also, and importantly, help to deliver a more coherent ecological network. This is a holistic concept that does not just refer to scenic value but also the ecological value and its biodiversity benefits. A designation would also end speculative applications for large scale developments on wild land and remove any ambiguity over how to treat wild land in the planning system, thereby reducing the burden of protracted legal wrangles and costly Public Local Inquiries.

Moreover, rewilding and wild land are concepts which are increasingly recognised around Europe and the world as a very attractive selling point for tourism and inward investment. Examples of rewilding

projects which have caught public imagination are Wild Ennerdale in the Lake District and Wild Nephin in Eire and EU funding is available for such projects.

In this Year of Natural Scotland, when we are celebrating the birthday of John Muir – the Scot who left the USA a magnificent legacy of protected wilderness areas that draw millions of visitors every year – we are appealing to the Scottish Government to show strong leadership in ensuring the protection of our wild land for centuries to come. We have the opportunity to show that development can be taken forward responsibly and that our wild land is an asset worthy of protection,

Yours sincerely,

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Chief Executive Officer

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