

LINK's Hill Track Campaign Report Launched Today

Summary

Scottish Environment LINK's hill tracks campaign group is today launching its 'Track Changes' report, which calls on the Scottish Government to bring to an end the current unregulated system for vehicular track construction which allows landowners to build tracks without any public oversight, and instead to bring their construction into the planning system. Our report gives photographic evidence of the damage caused to landscapes, wildlife and habitats across Scotland by some of these tracks, and aims to persuade the Scottish Government to remove permitted development rights from such tracks and enable proper public scrutiny of any future plans.

INTRODUCTION

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 30 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

In Scotland, land managers are permitted to construct vehicle tracks for agricultural or forestry purposes under Permitted Development Rights (PDRs). This allows tracks to be constructed without applications for planning permission, the satisfaction of minimum standards, or any need to inform local authorities, statutory bodies, or the general public. Since the *Town and Country Planning Act 1947*, thousands of kilometres of tracks have been built across Scotland under PDRs.

The legislation granting PDRs does not define agriculture or forestry, and as a result these rights have been effectively extended to cover tracks built for other purposes, notably for field sports. This has led to a rapid increase in the number and size of tracks constructed in recent years.

While many tracks are legitimately required for land management, their exemption from the normal planning process has resulted in very substantial damage to landscapes and environments across Scotland. Numerous tracks have been constructed to extremely poor standards over several decades, and successive political administrations have acknowledged, and yet failed to resolve, the problem. As the mechanical power available for track construction has increased, so standards have slipped further, and the impacts of PDR tracks now include:

- serious and wide-reaching visual impacts, leading to the loss of visual and environmental amenity;
- damage to sensitive vegetation and soils, especially in upland environments;
- the destruction of, and consequent loss of stored carbon from, large areas of peatland;
- initiation of erosion that often spreads over very large areas and causes silt run-off into waterways;
- damage to or destruction of geological and geomorphological features;
- devaluation of recreational opportunities;
- potential damage to tourism.

These impacts occur across Scotland and in almost all of our protective designations, including National Parks. The negative consequences of track construction are largely borne by the wider community, who have no say over the existence, location or design of tracks. Their disempowerment in the face of substantial economic and environmental impacts is unique in the planning system.

Successive governments have acknowledged and yet failed to act on this issue. Following a consultation on a review of the General Permitted Development Order in 2011 and a subsequent consultation which focussed on removing PDRs from hill tracks in 2012, the Scottish Government announced in December 2012 that it had determined not to remove these rights but to keep any

decision under review. The Minister challenged LINK members to produce evidence to demonstrate to him the need for legislative change.

In summer 2013, members of the 9 LINK organisations who are part of the hill tracks campaign group and also members of the public were called upon to take photos of tracks as they were out walking and to send these photos to our campaign. The report brings together this photographic evidence along with 11 case studies of representative tracks across Scotland, explaining how they came to be constructed and demonstrating the current failure of the PDR system.

Scotland's landscapes are of more value to the national economy than forestry and agriculture combined. However, they have been subject to steady attrition from unregulated tracks for many years. Individual tracks are now often large industrial developments in their own right; together, in their hundreds, their effects are enormous. Other developments of equivalent consequence are carefully considered in the formal planning process to ensure that their environmental impacts are justified by their economic, social or environmental benefits. Forestry, agriculture and field sports do not merit or require exemption from this level of consideration.

Permitted Development Rights were intended to apply to minor developments that would receive planning permission in any case. As the examples in this report show, these conditions do not apply to modern tracks. Scottish Environment LINK believes that there is an overwhelming case for the removal of Permitted Development Rights for tracks.

The full report can be downloaded at www.scotlink.org/hilltracks.

This LINK Parliamentary Briefing is supported by the following organisations who are members of the LINK hill tracks campaign group:

Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland
John Muir Trust
North East Mountain Trust
RSPB Scotland
ParksScottish Wild Land Group

Cairngorms Campaign
National Trust for Scotland
Ramblers Scotland
Scottish Campaign for National

This briefing is also supported by the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (not a LINK member)

For more information contact:

Helen Todd, co-coordinator Hill Tracks Campaign Group and Campaigns & Policy Manager,
Ramblers Scotland, 01577 861222 Helen.todd@ramblers.org.uk

Beryl Leatherland, co-cordinator Hill Tracks Campaign Groups and Scottish Wild Land Group
beryl@chway.plus.com

or the LINK Parliamentary Officer, **Andy Myles** on 0131 225 4345 or via email on
andy@scotlink.org www.scotlink.org