

THE NORTH EAST MOUNTAIN TRUST

The Cairngorm Club has been a member of the North East Mountain Trust, (NEMT), since its inception in 1980. The following question and answer article presents an overview of the Trust by its current Chair, Dave Windle and highlights some of the threats posed, particularly in the northeast of Scotland, to areas of landscape.

Q1 From where does your interest and concern about the Scottish Highlands and environmental issues stem?

I fell in love with the Highlands 50 years ago, when out on school camping trips. We went to places such as Torridon, Sutherland and Fisherfield. We had an early attempt on the Old Man of Stoe, shortly after Patey's first ascent. Like many of his routes, we experienced a severely under-graded climb and retired defeated! We were more successful on the Ben, completing some epic climbs, and making for memorable days. I left to go to university, and then worked abroad and in London.

When I got back to Aberdeen, after working away, I quickly reconnected with the hills. The Scottish Highlands is a very special place, and, when one is out in the open, gives a sense of perspective on the human ego. But, if you look at the scale of the changes that have taken place in the last 50 years, it is in urgent need of better protection.

I think that it is important to be out there in all weathers, doing some of a variety of things; camping, bothying, walking, climbing (see photograph opposite) and paddling. Being in the landscape gives you energy and motivation to campaign for protection when you get back.

Q2 What blogs or websites do you use to keep informed about relevant environmental issues?

I find Parkswatch, very useful to keep in touch with what's happening in our local Cairngorms National Park. The John Muir Trust, is very

helpful. If you're prepared to be depressed, visit, the [Raptor Persecution Scotland](#) site, to see the scale of the illegal killing by our "stewards of the countryside". [George Monbiot's blog](#), is a very useful if sometimes extreme view of reality, but it's well written and is a good introduction to the underlying issues.

Dave Windle



Mike Lates

Q3 Which is your favourite walk and why?

I have many favourite walks. I think that the islands are very special. The conjunction of sea and hills with relatively few people, together with a very good chance of seeing some special wildlife such as otters or eagles, makes them a “must-visit place” for me. I fear that this is now changing very quickly; we have all heard of the problems on Skye this summer, and even more remote islands such as Harris are becoming popular. It’s good for local businesses but less good for getting away from our crowded cities. However, islands like Mingulay and Pabbay are easy to get to and not crowded! Scarp has an abandoned village, is even easier to get to, and is fine for camping.

A remote walk involving one or two nights in a bothy is often good fun. Most of the time you get to meet interesting people and to enjoy a dram and some memorable craic.

Closer to home, walking in the Cairngorms evokes a sense of familiarity. The landscape is dramatic but, because you recognise the features, somehow comforting. Navigation becomes less of an issue, and you gain more time to look around and appreciate the detail. Walking along the plateau between Sgorr Gaoith and Mullach Clach a’ Bhlair, with views across to the cliffs along Loch Einich and then over to Cairn Toul, cannot fail to inspire you and, if in low cloud, test your navigation skills! If you want to get off the beaten track, then visit Glen Geusachan.

Q4 How is NEMT constituted?

NEMT, is an umbrella group, representing mostly hillwalkers and climbers but also others who enjoy getting outdoors and care about the mountain environment. There are two principal categories of membership: those who are members via a member club such as the Cairngorm Club, and individual members. Overall, it represents about 1,000 hillwalkers and climbers. It is a registered charity and is governed by a Board of Trustees, all of whom are voluntary. Member clubs are encouraged to nominate a trustee, and we try to get out to

visit clubs once a year to check that we are working on the issues that members care about. In the past, we have surveyed members and now hold members' evenings on a regular basis. By and large, we all seem to agree on the key issues that NEMT should be campaigning on.

Q5 With which other organisations does NEMT work?

NEMT is affiliated with a range of organisations such as Ramblers Scotland, the Bailies of Bennachie, Save Bennachie Alliance, Save Clachnaben, the Mountain Bothies Association and the local mountain rescue teams. We work closely with groups such as the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation group and the Cairngorms Campaign on issues to do with the National Park. Recently, these have included commenting on the new Partnership Plan, campaigning against the proposed An Camas Mor new town across the river from Aviemore, and trying to get Natural Retreats, the ski operator at Cairngorm, to work to better standards.

An important grouping is via Scottish Environment LINK, which currently represents 37 of Scotland's environmental charities, as varied as for example the Bat Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation Scotland, Friends of the Earth Scotland, Planning Democracy and Ramblers Scotland. Through LINK we seek to influence Government policy on issues that concern us. Our on-going work on hill tracks and on the management of driven grouse moors benefits from speaking with a single voice across the whole of Scotland.

Q6 How have the aims of NEMT changed over the years?

In many ways, the aims of NEMT have stayed the same over the years since it was inaugurated in 1980. We started by campaigning against inappropriate developments in the mountains and along our coastline. The nature of the developments has changed; skiing developments are less popular but the proliferation of hill tracks for both hydro schemes and shooting access are just as damaging. Instead of one or two massive developments, we now have multiple smaller developments.

We began by focussing on the northeast, particularly the Cairngorms, and still have our prime interest there. However, we do try to influence particularly bad developments elsewhere in Scotland.

What has changed is the need to work with others. Today, victories are won by working with other organisations. The role of NEMT is more important than ever. Individual clubs have a smaller voice than a wide range of NGOs speaking in unison. This can be seen in our dealings with the Cairngorms National Park Authority, where we meet with the CEO and his directors as part of Scottish Environment LINK. Similarly, we provide a conduit for projects such as “The Mountains & The People” to reach our members and clubs. The Mountains & The People is a partnership project which aims to conserve the upland landscape heritage of Scotland's two National Parks, led by the Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland.

This campaigning work needs to be supported by communicating with our clubs and members. We do this via our Winter Lecture series and our bi-annual newsletter, *Mountain Views*.

Q7 What do you consider to be the top threats to the uplands of the Northeast of Scotland?

I think that the excessive number of wind farm developments in some of our finest and wildest landscapes, increasingly intensive management of grouse moors, and the seeming inability of the government to force estates to properly manage their deer numbers are the biggest problems. Not far behind come issues such as our National Parks, which in Scotland are often seen as enablers for development rather than conservation, and lack local resources to enforce planning conditions.

In 2014, Scottish National Heritage, (SNH), published a map of the country showing 42 distinct areas of wild land, places that you could visit and see minimal signs of human interference (see photograph opposite).

Cairngorm Wild Land Area No. 15, SNH



Sandy McIntosh

The government talked of “*improved protection without the need for statutory intervention*”. Since then, we have seen these vital areas eroded and chipped away. The map is becoming worthless. In

conjunction with other NGOs and via LINK, we plan to support the campaign by John Muir Trust to “Keep it Wild”. This is a good example of an issue that requires a single well-coordinated voice. Please support us in this.

Land reform is a political issue at the present, with many people concerned about foreign ownership. In my view, this is a red herring. Compare what Sigrid Rausing and Anders Holch Povlsen have done for their estates with the locally owned Invercauld and Dinnet estates. What matters is the way the estate is run rather than who owns it. I’m in favour of greater local ownership but it’s not a panacea.

Q8 What are NEMT’s current priorities?

Not surprisingly, our priority list reflects the above threats. Our top priorities are as follows.

Inappropriate wind farm developments, a good example being the proposed Glen Dye wind farm, which will destroy views of and from Clachnaben. On a similar theme but smaller in scale, we have objected to several proposals for inappropriately sited mobile-phone masts in areas with great landscape significance.

Abuses in modern driven grouse moor management, with many local examples such as Invercauld and many of the estates in the Angus Glens. Threats arising from this include raptor poisoning, illegal hill track construction, muirburn and mountain hare persecution.

Working with other groups to influence the Cairngorms National Park Authority to stop chasing economic development at any cost and to take better care of this priceless asset (although it does seem that they do a better job than their colleagues in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs Park).

Working as part of the LINK Hill Tracks Group monitoring the recent change in the legal arrangements for applications to planning authorities for new tracks. The LINK Group will produce a report on its findings in 2018. This is likely to lead to a campaign to further tighten controls regarding where tracks can be built, for what purposes and to improve construction methods on the ground.

Working with others via LINK to support the campaign for better protection of our remaining fragments of wild land.

On an ongoing basis, we respond to Government consultations on these topics and related areas, such as proposed changes to the planning laws, affecting the general mountain environment.

In the future, as the topic rises on the political agenda and our MSPs realise that something more needs to be done, we expect to do more work on the correct management of deer numbers. The devastation caused by excessive deer numbers is there for us all to see.

Q9 What is the most significant success to date achieved for the landscape by NEMT?

Undoubtedly, our biggest success to date was in getting the proposed skiing development in Lurcher's Gully stopped in 1981, closely followed by stopping the proposed super-quarry at the Longhaven cliffs in 1980.

Success nowadays comes in smaller parcels. Some years ago, we appeared at two separate planning inquiries to get the Invercauld Estate to carry out mitigating works after very poor standards of track construction. Undoubtedly, this will have made them think twice about future track works. Together with other NGOs, we have managed to get the planning controls on new hill tracks tightened and are starting to get the Government to tame some of the absurdities of modern grouse moor management.

In many ways, our work to give better protection to mountain hares exemplifies modern campaigning. We started because of rumours that their numbers were dropping dramatically, typically because modern grouse moor management involves eradicating hares as they carry ticks, which, in turn carry the "louping ill" virus which can kill grouse chicks. Work has involved collecting evidence that indeed their numbers are falling, complaining to the European Commission (very effective because it rouses our own slumbering officials), and working with other NGOs with allied objectives (in this case, people concerned

with raptor persecution) to bring pressure to bear on the Government to do something about the abuses that go on in the name of grouse management. There are highs and lows, of course: writing to MSPs only to get standardised, anodyne responses can be soul-destroying, but the successes do compensate.

Q10 Which are the most significant pieces of legislation or guidance about the environment of which hillwalkers and climbers should be aware?

Most of the relevant environmental legislation is led by the Scottish Parliament's Committee for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, which also includes Flood Protection and Wildlife Crime. MSPs from across Scotland serve on this Committee, and currently Roseanna Cunningham is the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for these areas.

A most useful piece of legislation from our point of view is the European Habitats Directive. This "*ensures the conservation of a wide range of rare, threatened or endemic animal and plant species. Some 200 rare and characteristic habitat types are also targeted for conservation.*" It is a good example of a piece of European law making us do what we should have been doing in any case. I think of it as analogous to the bathing water quality directive which made the Government stop encouraging us to swim in our own sewage! It was adopted into UK law, and provides a framework for the protection of many rare and endangered species, requiring the government to ensure that specific species are maintained in "favourable condition". There is obviously a lot of interpretation involved, e.g. what constitutes "favourable condition" and how is this determined? However, it is a very useful piece of legislation. As noted above, threats of going to the EU tend to get a response from even the busiest civil servant.

Biodiversity is primarily protected via the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, p. 3148. However, at a working level, it is often more effective to complain via the Habitats Directive quoted above. In some

cases, if the site is protected, e.g. Natura 2000 or Site of Special Scientific Interest, then that legislation can provide an approach. Although, as Donald Trump demonstrated at Menie, it is comparatively easy to force a gold-plated limousine through these designations if you have the politicians in your hand.

The principal piece of wild life crime legislation is the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) . This is used to deter bat, badger, hare and raptor persecution amongst other priorities. Following concern about its effectiveness, it was reviewed in 2015 and a report produced. It is currently on the political agenda once again, following the publication of a report on disappearing golden eagles, clearly linking the problem to intensive grouse moor management, see the Guardian, 11 August 2016 and the Scottish Government Newsroom for Ministerial reaction. The problem is that most of these crimes are committed out in the open moorland out of sight of the public and proving an individual guilty is very difficult. One possible solution might be to introduce some specific form of vicarious liability, to encourage the owners to stop turning a blind eye to their gamekeepers' illegal practices. This requires a lower burden of proof than the criminal prosecution of a wayward gamekeeper and was successfully used in the case of disruption of a golden eagle's nest in Glendye.

Land reform in Scotland has been on the political agenda for a couple of decades now but has not yet delivered much in the northeast other than the very important right of responsible access, and some core paths. The pattern of land ownership on Deeside and Speyside has certainly not changed, except for Mar Lodge and Glenfeshie estates now managed by more enlightened purchasers. Even so, NEMT must keep a vigilant eye on what goes on even there: a carelessly operated bulldozer can cause a lot of semi-permanent damage in a day or two.

Similarly, legislation and regulation on deer management seem to change at only a snail's pace. In the Cairngorms, Glenfeshie is an outstanding success (deer numbers down by 90%, with lots of new trees), and Mar Lodge a partial one, though at the cost of a fence to divide the "full control" zone around the Lui Beg from the "moorland"

zone to the west. Elsewhere, browsing prevents regeneration except where prevented by – very expensive! – fencing. Very recently, SNH has been given new powers to take a stronger line with recalcitrant estates; once again, NEMT will now adopt a “wait and see” position.

Scottish Natural Heritage, working with the Scottish Government and a range of stakeholders has published a National Peatland Plan, to highlight the importance of Scotland's peatlands. It draws attention to the poor state of large areas of peat and proposes building on existing initiatives to secure their sustainable use, management and restoration.

The Plan also sets out some proposals for research and awareness-raising. To achieve these objectives, a National Peatland Group which is being chaired by Scottish Natural Heritage, has been established to promote the Plan and to support its implementation. The Group is being supported by a Research and Monitoring Group to ensure a sound scientific basis for the management and restoration activities proposed, and to inform future work.

Q11 What can Cairngorm Club members do to contribute to the work of NEMT?

The first thing to do is to get out into the hills and enjoy them. You get back energised and ready to do things to help in their conservation. We need more volunteers to help with campaigning. MSPs are busy but will respond to persistent constituent pressure. Many constituents are more difficult to ignore than a single constituent. If enough of us write to and visit our MSPs about an issue, they take notice. MSPs are an important group as they can activate tardy civil servants in both local and national departments. Taking photographs and recording changes can provide evidence (see photograph opposite), which is important in getting organisations such as SNH to act. Producing detailed evidence on the decline of mountain hares certainly helped in this respect.

Example of Bad Tracks



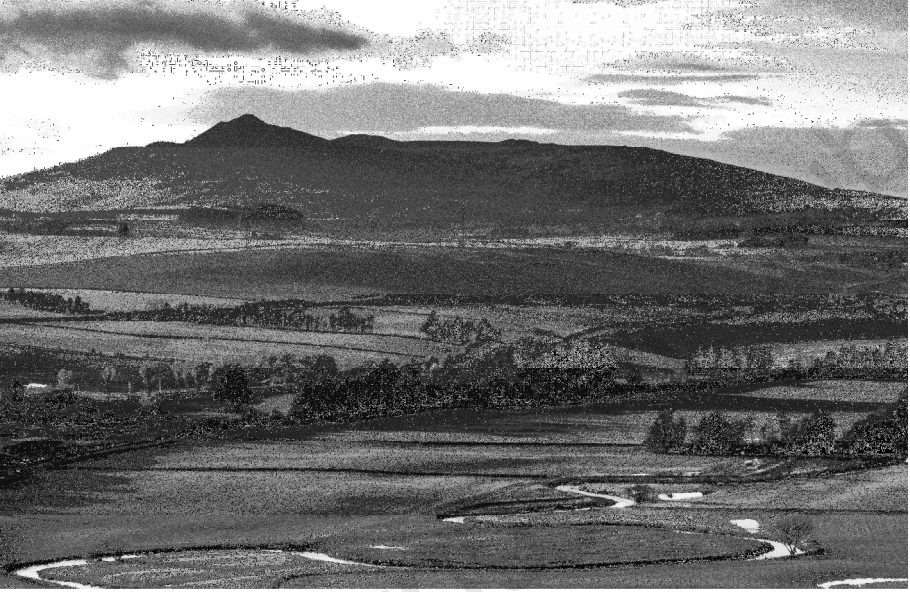
Adam Watson

However, a good beginning is to take more interest in these matters and to get better informed. Attending some of our NEMT lectures, helps us attract better speakers and reading *Mountain Views*, (a good signpost for live issues) and published in Spring and Autumn will keep you informed. Signing online petitions can help, as shown by the mountain hare campaign run by the Scottish charity, OneKind.

The hills and wild places are our sanctuary and are more than ever needed in this fractured world. In the words of John Muir: “*Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.*”

If you enjoy the hills, fight for them.

Save Bennachie



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The Cairn