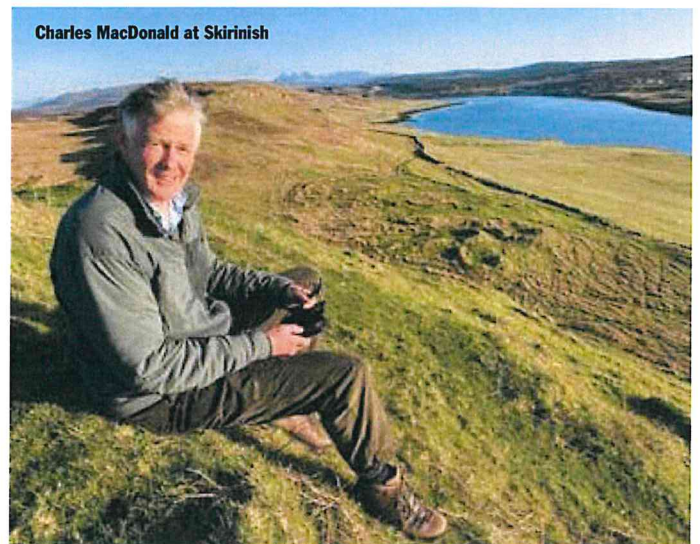




Photograph: WILLIE URQUHART

Ben Aketil



Charles MacDonald at Skirinish

Wind farms will change Skye forever



CHARLES MACDONALD, who said he has turned down offers to site wind farms on land he owns in north Skye, on why he believes the island should think twice about some of the projects currently being pursued...

I AM CONCERNED THAT residents of Skye are sleepwalking into a world which none of us properly understand. I am talking about the scale and number of industrial wind turbines.

Over the past year or so, the WHFP has included multiple planning applications/proposals for new wind farms as well as so called "re-powering" of old sites. This is a euphemism for replacing old, smaller turbines with new, much bigger ones.

Evidence elsewhere shows that initially (like here on Skye) permission is given for a few turbines. Once established, additional permissions are given for sometimes hundreds more turbines covering one colossal area.

See what has happened in the Lammermuirs, south east of Edinburgh, and you will understand. The visual character of the landscape has completely changed.

If planning is granted for all (or even some) of them, it is very likely that the landscape of the Isle of Skye as we currently know it, will change forever. One application on its own will be the fourth largest wind farm in the UK. Is this what we want?

Skye is already self-sufficient in electricity - the two existing wind farms produce enough for about 62,000 homes.

Then we have the Storr Loch Hydro which provides additional electricity. Does the island want to become an industrial site supplying the rest of the UK with electricity?

After subsidies were removed from wind farms in 2015 it required the size of the turbines to roughly double in order to be economic. New turbines are generally over 4MW (mega watts) and getting larger, whereas previously they were 2.5MW. Modern turbines are about 200m in height. Once in place, the tips of these turbines may well be 1,200 feet above sea level - over one third of the height of the largest Cuillin.

I understand surveys show onshore wind turbines are generally quite popular. However, I am not sure that the people who participate in these surveys have to live near to them or anticipate the scale of what is being proposed.

Furthermore, do these people live where many earn their existing living from tourists who want to come to the very landscape we are about to change beyond recognition. Perhaps this is wrong and a substantial majority of Skye residents want them.

MY MAIN CONCERN is that permission is only granted after the full implications are properly understood and with the willing acceptance of the majority.

The single biggest application, Muirhall, were proposing 59 turbines which would power 260,000 homes.

Their consultation roadshow has been touring the

village halls. Their people are helpful and they provide some useful information.

As is typical, they have now made a small reduction to the number of turbines, showing they have responded to consultation. Truthfully, this will still be a giant scheme. Such is the scale that it will be visible from large parts of the island.

The visual impact - illustration of skylines for example - are generally poorly illustrated. Previously, they stated that they didn't know which nacelle (the generating part) will be used. It doesn't really matter, the height will be the same. Better visualisations may shock.

A large sum (more than other developers) will be made available for the community - possibly £2 million.

While this sounds good, is it really that attractive? Precedents show the village hall will get smartened up, local bridges repaired and so forth. However, the majority of the residents of Skye will see no benefit.

The main beneficiaries have little connection with the island. The forestry land being used for this application was bought less than three years ago, almost certainly with the sole intention of applying for planning permission.

Revealingly, the owner wishes their name to be withheld. The remainder of the land is actually owned by SGRPID (the Scottish Government) who will be granting the permission, a definite conflict of interest.

I am entirely in favour of capitalism, enterprise and prosperity. No one is doing anything wrong and they are helping to reduce climate change.

However, many developers (possibly Muirhall) never actually intend to build these wind farms. The cost is so large they often sell the project on to a larger company - think BP, Vattenfall etc - who then build them and see it as a business.

IN MY JOB as a fund manager I have seen many renewable projects to invest in. There is never any talk of "community" or biodiversity loss; it is all IRRs (internal rate of return), yield and comes with a tick in the box for scoring high on environmental credentials.

There is talk of local job creation. This may be the case but I view this with some suspicion. A site visit to a wind farm under construction on the mainland on a brutal day some years ago revealed only foreign nationals working. An operator from SSE told me the other day that maintenance and servicing of a farm up in Caithness was all carried out by technical personnel from Inverness. Will there really be many jobs for people based on Skye?

The sheer scale of what is being proposed will cause significant biodiversity loss. There is huge destruction to the ground in the process of building; roads, enormous concrete and steel bases and borrow pits. There will also be the sub stations as well as new grid and pylons that are needed to export the electricity.

On the one hand we have the John Muir Trust trying to preserve nature and wild land, on the other, large companies wanting to industrialise the landscape.

Skye depends on tourists in a big way. The Moffat Centre report for Skye Connect in 2020 apparently suggested that 2,850 jobs in Skye are generated by tourism. That is nearly 30 per cent of the Skye population and possibly more if you consider the percentage of families/homes. Filming at the Quiraing has attracted visitors in their herds, too many for the current infrastructure.

Maybe they will still come, but I worry that it may diminish enthusiasm to make a visit if our majestic and widely appreciated scenery effectively becomes a giant industrial landscape.

Perhaps this all sounds very negative and betrays a personal bias against the visual impact. I plead guilty to that as well as declaring conflicts of interest.

I have several potential developers who appear to want to build wind farms or create hydrogen on my property. If that is what most people of Skye want, perhaps I too shall try to join the gold rush (it is tempting).

Before doing so, though, I want everyone to be properly informed about the impact. I belong to a family who cares deeply about the future of Skye, having tried hard for 150 years to make it a happy, prosperous place to live and to do so in harmony with nature.

MAKE NO MISTAKE, the Isle of Skye is about to be used as a large-scale resource to supply outsiders with electricity. Also, on an island with severe fuel poverty, residents will be paying some of the highest variable unit prices for their electricity. I fear we may look back in a generation's time and regret it. Could it be similar to some African countries with large commodity resources; take a look at the Niger Delta?

There are alternatives. Might it be better to build wind farms offshore and nearer to where the electricity is needed? Certainly, they are a bit more expensive but prices are reducing rapidly.

Would it be worth trying to set up a mutually owned, island electricity company? Perhaps hydrogen produced from small-scale wind could power the lorries that supply the island (maybe ferries too if we ever get some new ones), possibly central heating and better still, no grid is required. In the future, even nuclear fusion is possible.

I believe a better discussion is required before planning is considered. Perhaps our local MP and MSP could educate us more and show us what alternatives are possible.

Indeed, I hope this might lead to a much needed new "vision for the future" for our beautiful island. I would be happy to organise a meeting to allow people to share their views.

*Charles Macdonald
Tote House, Skeabost Bridge*

I have had quite a lot of often unexpected feedback. Here are some examples:

I must say I agree with you 100% on everything. I do love turbines and the job they do, but they have to be placed in moderation otherwise their presence changes from gracefully swinging blades to a grotesque industrial outcrop like some demented Mechano set. And that tipping point between the two scenes is where we are on Skye.

A very difficult and emotive subject covered, I thought, in a balanced and honest treatment of all aspects involved. So much of what you said, needed to be said, and your arguments were extremely well put across. This is a subject that is going to be discussed more and more, and a piece such as yours, outlining the pro and cons will be most relevant in future prospective developments for Skye and related areas.

Balanced, sensible, frank, clear-eyed and with deep concern for the island and its inhabitants at its heart. Congratulations. I hope it has the desired effect of sparking a well- informed debate in Skye. Too right about the visualisations. They are usually a bad joke.

It must have taken a great deal of research and your valuable time. All that you say is true and it has to be good to sound the alarm. Sadly I fear that to achieve any change one has to convince the Scottish Government. The people of Caithness (possibly a better illustration than the Lammermuirs, there is at least reasonably close to where the energy is needed), have been fighting for ages with almost no success. They have even got Highland Council on their side in one or two situations only to be overruled by Edinburgh. We all feel powerless and the truth is that, living in our form of democracy, we are.

Due to the uncontrolled growth of Scottish wind energy and energy costs generally, the cost of constraining Scottish onshore windfarms has risen in the last twelve months. It now stands at £1.25bn pa. That is more than a four-fold increase in one year. Scottish wind energy now accounts for 92% off all UK constraint costs, with 17% of Scottish annual wind farm output being constrained or turned off. A great deal of money spent for providing nothing.