

Sarah Boyack

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

Hill Tracks (Scottish Uplands)

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the number of engineered hill tracks appearing in the Scottish uplands, particularly in the Highlands; notes that such tracks can be constructed without planning consent when justified as being for agricultural, forestry or repair purposes; further notes the growing number of concerns from hill walkers, rambles and mountaineers and members of the wider public about the intrusion of these tracks into the natural landscape and the impact on otherwise wild land; considers that, given the importance of the Scottish uplands for current and future generations, this warrants greater scrutiny of proposals for such tracks within the planning system; recognises the legitimate rights of farmers and crofters to continue to construct tracks for their purposes on what will generally be lower-lying land than considered to be a problem in this context; notes that Heriot-Watt University reported on these issues in March 2007, and would welcome the urgent mapping of tracks by reviewing current knowledge of track location and control provisions and consideration of future possibilities for greater control of developing hill tracks and the criteria under which any greater controls might operate.

Sarah Boyack: I congratulate Peter Peacock on securing tonight's debate.

The debate so far shows that hill tracks can be an issue.

Peter Peacock and I have taken the opportunity during the summer recess to look at some of the areas where one can see the impact of badly designed hill tracks.

I understand absolutely, and take the point from several colleagues, that we need a system that farmers and crofters can live with.

They have to be able to manage their land effectively and support the economic activity that they carry out.

Christopher Harvie's analysis of the situation was spot on: it is a question of balance.

In response to Murdo Fraser's final point about wind farms, I say that the whole point is that hill tracks should be brought under the planning system, which would provide an opportunity for democratic accountability and to say, "No, we don't accept this development," as has happened with many wind farm proposals.

Where new tracks are accepted, there will be the potential to mitigate their impact in relation to issues such as peat and access.

That is at the heart of the discussion.

We need to look at the cumulative impact, which has been raised by several organisations, because there is not sufficient monitoring of the situation.

As Alison McInnes pointed out, we are losing the features that make people want to holiday in the Highlands and Islands.

There is a lack of enforcement—that point was put very well by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

This is not a new issue.

It has not just popped on to our agenda; it has been out there for several years, which is one of the reasons why it came up in the Heriot-Watt study, and it needs to be addressed.

Let us look at the recommendations from Heriot-Watt.

There are ways of managing the situation that would not be excessively onerous on land managers.

One recommendation is to develop a comprehensive register of hill tracks so that we can monitor and evaluate the impact on the landscape, as well as the ecological condition of hill tracks.

That point was well made by Maureen Watt.

We should have a system of prior notification—

Jamie McGrigor: Will the member give way?

Sarah Boyack: I ask Jamie McGrigor to let me continue.

He did not take any interventions in his speech and I have a pile to get through.

Let us look at the recommendations and examine what opportunities could come from them.

To deal with the impact of mobile phone masts, we use a system of prior notification, which is a way of bringing a development into the planning system without automatically introducing onerous requirements.

That is a balanced approach that should be considered for hill tracks.

Another recommendation is to have a voluntary

code of conduct that would reflect the best techniques and practice out there.

We would look at what SNH recommends and encourage people to follow that best practice.

Therefore, there are ways of looking for best practice.

The John Muir Trust has made the point that it is a landowner and it is aware of the opportunities for good land management.

There is a lot of best practice that we could consider.

Peter Peacock outlined the problems that have been raised with us.

I emphasise that issues such as erosion and impacts particularly in the higher altitudes where biodiversity is fragile and takes years to recover are important and need to be considered.

Ramblers Scotland has considered fencing and its impact on access.

The debate lets us consider really difficult issues.

There are balances to be struck, and some of the issues are controversial, but that should not mean that we should not examine them.

I hope that the minister will say when he will put in place the review that was suggested three years ago.

The issue has been on the go for a long time.

We have had a members' business debate on it and there is a live petition on it.

That should lead to action.

There are no hill tracks in my constituency, but members would be amazed by how many thousands of people go from our cities to our rural communities because they love our rural landscapes.

People love our wild land and landscapes that are not quite as wild but are still exciting.

Such things are a fantastic release from the city, which is why hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Scotland.

If we do not value and monitor our landscapes, we could lose a fantastic part of Scotland's character.

We should be concerned about that.

It is a pity that Rob Gibson, who spoke about national parks, has left the chamber. The point of the last ministerial commitment to a national parks review was that we could pick up precisely such issues and have a proper look at their impact on the national parks.

The issue has been raised and a warning has been sounded.

I hope that ministers will listen and act.