Trump’s golf course - Society’s nature
The death and resurrection of nature conservation

The story of Trump’s golf resort development in Scotland, part of which falls on a protected natural area, is more than just another example of nature succumbing to economics. It symbolises the death of traditional nature conservation as a stand-alone exercise. The new green phoenix that arises from the ashes will need to integrate current, place-based conservation with a (local) green economy and sustainable living.

KOEN ARTS & GINA MAFFEY

I. Tee off

“I have never seen such an unspoiled and dramatic seaside landscape,” said a flamboyant American millionaire, “and the location makes it perfect for our development.”2 The flamboyant millionaire was none other than Donald Trump, and the unspoiled and dramatic seaside landscape was part of a unique sand dune system stretching northwards along the Scottish coastline from Aberdeen. In 2006, Trump bought Menie Estate in Aberdeenshire with the intention to build the “world’s greatest golf course”.3 More precisely, a golf resort that would include two 18 hole golf courses, a clubhouse, golf academy, driving range, 450 room five-star hotel, 36 golf villas, 950 holiday homes, and space for future residential development of 500 houses.4

There were ‘minor’ issues from the beginning of the development; the north of the estate was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); there were tentative plans for an offshore wind farm nearby; and Menie Estate encircled the homes and land of local residents (Map 1). But none of these issues deterred a seasoned and powerful developer like Trump. In the words of one of his lawyers: “the word ‘cannot’ does not appear in his dictionary.”5 Business leaders, tourism representatives, the First Minister and others across Scotland were in high spirits. Staggering promises popped up in the media: an investment of one billion pounds generating 6,000 jobs during the building process. And not to forget a new primary school, a new bus service and half a million pounds to aid social learning.

II. In the rough

In 2007, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) really began to spoil the party, as they advised Aberdeenshire Council on the proposal. “This development, specifically

Core wild area safe for now?
Finally, in a surprise but welcome move in April, SSE Renewables announced it had delayed lodging a development consent order for the 62-turbine development it has proposed for Nant y Moch after considering the “investment climate”. SSE Renewables said it was “likely” that it would not make any further investment into the Nant y Moch development, and later in April the area was put on the market for £1.2m, although the potential for wind turbine development was included in the prospectus. Nant Y Moch is a core wild area of the Cambrian Mountains and high profile campaigns have been mounted to protect it from wind infrastructure developments. Nant Y Moch has a special environmental quality that wilderness campaigners would protect with direct action in places overseas. The Cambrian Mountains Society has tried to get the area designated in recent years but the area’s zoning for potential wind turbines has perhaps been too much of a distraction in policy circles at WAG. As ECOS goes to press it is hoped that the area can now be secured by conservation or amenity groups so that future generations can experience Nant Y Moch for its wildlife and rich tranquillity.

Alison Davies is Chair of the Campaign for Upland Powys. chairman@cupowys.org

Snow at Gladyn, looking to Pumlumon in the heart of the Cambrian mountains. Possible wind turbine infrastructure across this landscape would prevent other possibilities for wildlife improvement and retaining the area’s wild land values.

Photo: Simon Ayres
the championship golf course and associated infrastructure, will have significant adverse impacts both to the coastal landform interest and the coastal vegetation within the Foveran Links SSSI and also to the sand dune habitats south of the SSSI. [...] SNH does not consider it possible to mitigate or compensate for the loss of this important habitat. SNH therefore objects to the proposal to construct a championship golf course in its current location.”

Furthermore, at a local meeting some residents expressed opposition to the plans, and Sustainable Aberdeenshire held a 200 people strong beach protest. In November 2007, the Formartine Area Committee granted outline planning approval. But soon after that the Aberdeenshire Council’s Infrastructure Committee overruled the decision and rejected the approval by chairman Martin Ford’s casting vote. The Scottish Government was not pleased. It ‘called in’ the decision on planning approval, claiming that the decision was of national significance. As a result, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, was to have the final say on the matter.

III. Foul play?
It is known that, after first visiting Menie Estate in April 2005, Trump subsequently met with Scotland’s First Minister Jack McConnell in New York in October 2005. Two years later, it was the turn of a new Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, to dine with Trump, again in New York. Moreover, the day before the decision on the proposal was called in by the Scottish Government, Salmond met Trump’s representatives in Aberdeen. Opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament heavily criticised the events and a Parliament Inquiry was instigated. The Inquiry Committee concluded that the decision to call in the application after being rejected by the planning authority was “unprecedented”. Salmond’s involvement was deemed “cavalier” and showed “exceptionally poor judgement”. The opposition pointed out that ministers were criticised on 46 occasions. However, the report was without tangible political consequences, and a government spokesman emphasised that ministers had acted legally.

IV. Immovable obstruction: the bunker
At the end of 2008, the Scottish Government granted outline planning permission. With the political decision-making going its way, the Trump Organisation (again) approached local residents to buy more land. Some residents still refused to sell, notably Michael Forbes (with a 23 acres farm), his mother Molly Forbes, and David Milne. Anticipating potential compulsory purchase orders from Aberdeenshire Council, Michael Forbes sold some of his land to the newly formed protest group Tripping Up Trump in 2010. The group created a legal maze by putting the names of hundreds of protesters on the title deeds to the land. In early 2011, a petition was lodged with the Scottish Parliament against potential compulsory purchase orders. This was shortly followed by a statement from the Trump Organisation outlining that it had no interest in pursuing the compulsory purchase order route.

In July 2012, the golf course, a restaurant and a shop were officially opened. But the conflict continued. The 2011 protest documentary ‘You’ve been trumped’ was broadcast by the BBC on 21 October 2012. Among its footage were recordings of the filmmakers being arrested by Grampian Police when filming near the course. As a result, the Grampian Police received 276 complaints over the arrests. Of late, on 11 March 2013, David Milne lodged an 11,000 plus signature petition with the Scottish Parliament for a public inquiry into the handling of the development by local and national governments. On 25 March, the petition had reached over 17,000. Milne had originally hoped for 2000 signatures.

V. A different ball game
At a renewable energy inquiry before the Scottish Parliament in April 2012, Trump accused politicians of luring him on false pretences to invest in the area. The false pretences Trump referred to concerned the construction of an offshore wind farm near Aberdeen. He subsequently announced that further resort development was on hold. The Trump Organisation later commissioned a newspaper advert that showed rusty wind turbines with the text “Welcome to Scotland” and “Alex Salmond wants to build 8,750 of these monstrosities”. Other organisations have since dropped their resistance, including SNH and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, both of which originally opposed the wind turbine plans. But the Trump Organisation has maintained its opposition to date, calling for a public inquiry on the matter. In early March 2013, the Trump Organisation released a teaser image of the hotel, and
stressed that it will only be built if the wind turbine application is rejected. On the 26th of March 2013, it was announced by the Scottish Government that the wind farm plans had been approved. Shortly after that, the Trump Organisation declared it will be bringing a lawsuit against this decision.

### Table 1. Overview of events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Apr Trump visits Menie estate.</td>
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<td>Oct Scotland’s First Minister McConnell meets Trump in New York.</td>
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<td>Jan Talks occur between the Trump Organisation and Aberdeenshire Council officials.</td>
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<td>Mar Trump purchases Menie estate.</td>
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<td>Apr Trump announces plans for a golf resort.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Apr Trump is concerned over wind farm plans off the coast of Aberdeen.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May McConnell rejects claims regarding a breach of ministerial rules over his dealings with Trump.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May McConnell makes Trump a ‘Global Scot’ ambassador for Scotland.</td>
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<td>May Full golf resort planning application submitted to Aberdeenshire Council.</td>
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<td>Mar SNH advises Aberdeenshire Council against the proposal.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aug SNH upholds objection to the development despite changes to the proposal.</td>
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<td>Sep Aberdeenshire Council planners recommend development approval. A 28-signature petition against the proposal is reported. Overall there are 432 letters of representation, 105 against, 327 in support. Public meeting at Balmedie Primary School.</td>
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<td>First Minister Salmond meets Sustainable Aberdeenshire.</td>
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<td>Nov Sustainable Aberdeenshire holds beach protest.</td>
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<td>Nov Formartine Area Committee in Ellon grants outline planning approval.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nov Aberdeenshire Council’s Infrastructure Committee rejects planning approval.</td>
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<td>Dec Trump Organisation states it will not appeal the rejection. Scottish Government ‘calls in’ decision on planning approval.</td>
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<td>Jan Parliamentary Inquiry into Scottish Government’s intervention. Martin Ford is sacked as chairman of the Infrastructure Committee.</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Mar Parliamentary Inquiry findings are published.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jun Aberdeen Public Local Inquiry – main stakeholders are heard.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dec Scottish Government formally grants outline planning permission.</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Jan Approval voted worst planning decision in the Carbuncle Awards.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May Trump Organisation again approaches remaining local residents for land purchase.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sep Planning permission granted by Formartine Area Committee over land owned and occupied by locals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oct Start of preparatory earthworks on golf course site.</td>
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### A disconcerting history: old and new lessons

There are at least five striking points to note from the turbulent history of events that surround the Trump golf resort development (see Table 1 one for a detailed timeline of events).

#### a. Irresistible sums?

As so often with the promise of big investments, figures are exaggerated by proponents of the development, and uncritically reproduced by the media. In the case of Trump’s golf resort, these figures have ranged from a £300m investment
pressure, which is ironic when the designation was in part meant to protect precious natural areas from development in the first place. Given SNH’s explicit reference to the European Habitats and Species Directive in its advice to the Aberdeenshire Council, it also shows that European legislation is either not properly integrated into Scottish legislation, or ultimately inadequate in itself.

b. Shifting public opinion
In September 2007, Aberdeenshire council received a 28-signature petition against the proposed golf resort. In March 2013, an 11,000 plus signature petition was lodged with the Scottish Parliament. It seems that public opinion towards the project has shifted over the years, much of which can be attributed to the increased exposure and awareness of the project. Michael Forbes winning the Top Scot award in 2012 situates this story as a modern David and Goliath; the brave and ordinary local residents fighting an American millionaire who is used to getting his way. The loss of the sand dune habitat now plays only a small part in the continuing narrative. Salmond’s changing attitude towards Trump is also telling. In the early days of the development, he frequently associated himself in the media with the Trump Organisation. A couple of years later the opposite is the case. Although Trump wanted to have Salmond at the official golf course opening, Salmond was not there. At Alicia Bruce’s photo exhibition, showing portraits of local residents at the Scottish Parliament, Salmond said that he greatly admired the Forbes family. This makes one wonder: if the events between 2005 and 2007 were to repeat themselves today, would Salmond’s (and the Scottish Government’s) decision be the same?

c. Skewed political decision-making
It is striking that the Inquiry Committee labelled the Scottish Government’s decision to call in the application “unprecedented”. Especially when bearing in mind that the case only became of national interest after the application was rejected. Furthermore, the situation where the Finance Minister took the ultimate decision on the future of a SSSI, seems nonsensical. However, throughout the whole process Aberdeenshire Council stated that they “have been very keen to ensure that all information has been available to the public and they are given full opportunity to comment on all details of the proposals”. Perhaps the decision-making process was largely transparent, legal, accounted for, and in accordance with democratic procedures. But the key question is whether there is true legitimacy in decision-making, and any real purpose in public consultation for that matter, if key planning decisions are possibly made between two people over dinner?

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local interests and local nature designations particularly vulnerable; especially when they collide with the corporate-political complex that employs the mantra of national interest.

It should never have happened...
One could argue that these five points are the unfortunate particularities of just one case. But at the same time it cannot be ignored that all the beneficial ingredients for conservation have been in place in this story. Like many other Western counties, Scotland is an established democracy, it is on the whole an affluent society, there is an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, a high level of education, a well-developed civil society with many non-governmental organisations, expert environmental advisory bodies, there are protest groups, autonomous media, and citizens are more rapidly engaged with events through the use of internet and social media. Furthermore, there is the legacy of more than a century of nature conservation: (inter)national environmental legislation, long standing realisation of how few wild places remain, good understanding of complex ecological processes, deep insight into the current state of our planet, and awareness of the impact of the human footprint on it. But despite all of this, the unique, dynamic, pristine sand dunes of Menie Estate were transformed into a golf course.

The death of nature conservation
This story reveals a fundamental flaw with traditional nature conservation: since its birth, about 150 years ago, it has struggled to become part of the solution to the problem of societies leaning on constant economic growth, the depletion of natural resources, and the overall destruction of Planet Earth. The loss of the sand dunes shows that – save perhaps in recreational purposes for some – nature does not have much value for many. And as individuals’ daily lives seem to further disconnect from the natural world, it is even more difficult to find support for any environmental ethic that requires individuals to care beyond their primary and secondary necessities of life. At present, environmental values are still poorly integrated within the overall political, socio-economic, and cultural frameworks of modern life. As a result, traditional nature conservation is too often a stand-alone exercise, and for that reason particularly vulnerable. If nature conservation was ever alive, the transformed dunes of Menie estate symbolise that is has little meaning for the majority in today’s societies. If nature conservation was ever alive, the transformed dunes of Menie estate symbolise its death.

Resurrection: green phoenix
Yet, numerous ECOS articles illustrate that there is hope. Successful, innovative conservation initiatives, ranging from integrated land use management to community-based action, demonstrate that after burning itself down, a green phoenix is able to resurrect itself from the ashes of its predecessor. There is, of course, no simple, uniform answer to the general indifference to nature conservation in modern life. Different locations, cultures, and traditions require tailor-made, often bottom-up, solutions. But if this green phoenix succeeds in integrating current place-based, stand-alone conservation with a (local) green economy, there is the potential to take a sustainable living approach more widely. Conservation will then be the logical and intuitive consequence of the realisation that the resources we use and the places we enjoy, all stem from nature.

References
NB: All webpages were last accessed on 24-03-2013.
Forest policy resolved?  
The future’s hunky-dory

The Government’s response to the 2012 Future of Forests report from the Forestry Panel gets a wry smile.

MARTIN SPRAY

I was reminded - not for the first time - last month, of psychiatric patients watching a speech by Ronald Reagan (‘Bedtime for Bonzo’ 1951, US President 1981-89). The sound was turned off, and they were convulsed with laughter. They thought the gestures and expressions were the miming antics of a comedian.

It isn’t funny, but it can make a cynic smile. We read in its forestry policy statement that the Government accepts the need to develop a new woodland culture and economy, accepts the value of the Public Forestry Estate, accepts the need to increase access to both public and private woodland, and accepts the need to increase the extent of English woodland. It is “fully committed to protecting our woodland assets from the ever-increasing range and scale of threats”. It shares the vision, and the aspirations of the Independent Forestry Panel, which reported enthusiastically in July 2012.

If only…. I’m afraid that the cloud of cynicism around almost any government statement – from any government – thickened dramatically as I read on. This is an era of fluffy politics and weasely words. Where does one start? A full commitment is somewhat less hedged than a qualified commitment. Everything Government does must be focused on protecting, improving, and expanding our woods and forests. The protection is presumably from the ever-increasing threats Government makes. Its policies will promote sustainable growth - and deregulation will ensure the sector is as free as possible to pursue its woodland interests. Government should facilitate, not dictate. It agrees that forestry is long-term, thus its policy will enable Government to take the long view. Only a short view, though, is needed to see some of the problems to be met. One potentially valuable area to explore is the woodfuel market - but this must not compete unfairly with other markets for home-grown wood. I am told that the current extant and proposed wood-fired power stations would require the annual importing from Canada and Russia of several times the total UK wood crop. Sustainable growth? If only!...

There was, nevertheless, much relief following the Statement. In the Forest of Dean, Hands Off Our Forest (HOOF) found the Statement very encouraging. Like other organisations, however, HOOF is concerned at what looks like an attempt to take a long view and implement its full commitment on a starvation diet. A new,