

Proposed Micro-hydroelectric scheme at Allt Mhuic Butterfly Reserve

There is currently a proposal to install a hydro electric scheme on the Allt Mhuic on the north side of Loch Arkaig. Most of the proposed work will take place on the Allt Mhuic Butterfly Reserve, on land owned by Forestry Commission Scotland and managed in conjunction with Butterfly Conservation. The work will involve the building of a turbine house on land to the east of the burn adjacent to the car park, installation of a buried pipe along a route east of the burn, with an intake area above the current forestry road to the north. A permanent vehicular access road will be constructed between the forest road and the inflow. During construction the current reserve car park will be taken over by contractors and will not be available for public use. In addition, there is to be a second proposal to upgrade the existing high voltage power line that was only installed two years ago. This will involve digging up the existing cable that passes through the length of the southern part of the reserve, which in turn will cause further major disruption along the Loch Arkaig road and damage additional butterfly habitat. The butterfly reserve is overlooked by the South Arkaig Forest, owned and managed by the Woodland Trust in conjunction with Arkaig Community Forest on the south shore of Loch Arkaig.

The chequered skipper is a very local butterfly in the UK, found only within 50km of Fort William. With handsome chocolate brown and gold chequered wings, this feisty little skipper is full of character. Flying from mid-May to mid-June, it has a very exacting habitat requirement, its larvae feeding on purple moor grass in mild, damp conditions that allow the caterpillars to grow well into the autumn before they overwinter in tussocks. Much has been made in the media of a multi-million-pound reintroduction of the butterfly in Northampton using Belgian stock, it having become extinct in England in the 1970s.

This proposal is not acceptable in terms of the effect on biodiversity, and therefore the Lochaber Biodiversity Action Group, formed to implement the Lochaber Biodiversity Action Plan in 2004, is considering objecting to any planning applications in relation to the butterfly reserve. The following reasons are given for objection:

- 1) This is the only specific butterfly reserve in the whole of the Highlands, and indeed, one of the few publicly accessible nature reserves in Lochaber. The reserve celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2018, to coincide with the 50th. anniversary of the formation of Butterfly Conservation.
- 2) The work will cause specific damage to habitat currently used by chequered skippers, and possibly pearl-bordered fritillary for breeding. Both of these butterflies were previously identified as priority species under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and the Scottish Biodiversity List. Some of this will be a permanent loss, while part of the buried pipeline will cause temporary destruction of butterfly habitat. A wealth of other insects and wildlife, including reptiles, may also be affected. The rare butterfly populations on the reserve are already fragile, and this work could cause local extinction.
- 3) A long-term Forest Research project on management of land for chequered skippers using grazing schemes will be severely compromised and may have to be abandoned as construction work will inevitably introduce changes in habitat conditions. This will lead to a loss of valuable scientific information as well as constituting a waste of resources, time and effort.

- 4) Although not categorised as a particularly sensitive burn, changes in the water flow in the Allt Mhuic through abstraction of water along the pipe may lead to irreversible damage of rare riparian bryophyte and lichen communities of the Western Atlantic rainforest, for which Lochaber is particularly important.
- 5) Construction of an access track may well destroy existing rare moss and lichen populations, in particular, the lichens *Fuscopannaria sampaiana* (NT) and *Fuscopannaria mediterranea* (NS)
- 6) The construction of permanent structures and roads within the reserve will change the character of the reserve and make it a less attractive option for visitors, reducing the possibility of butterfly tourism in the Arkaig area.
- 7) The temporary loss of the car park and disruption of traffic due to construction work will lead to a temporary loss of visitors, and annoyance of locals, including Woodland Trust staff and visitors.
- 8) The gain from a hydro along the burn in terms of electricity generated is likely to be marginal and not worth the potential loss of biodiversity, natural capital and local tourism.
- 9) The granting of licences to construct hydro schemes in key areas of biodiversity by Forestry Commission Scotland may constitute a breach of their Biodiversity Duty under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011.