

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.

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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

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".⁶

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.

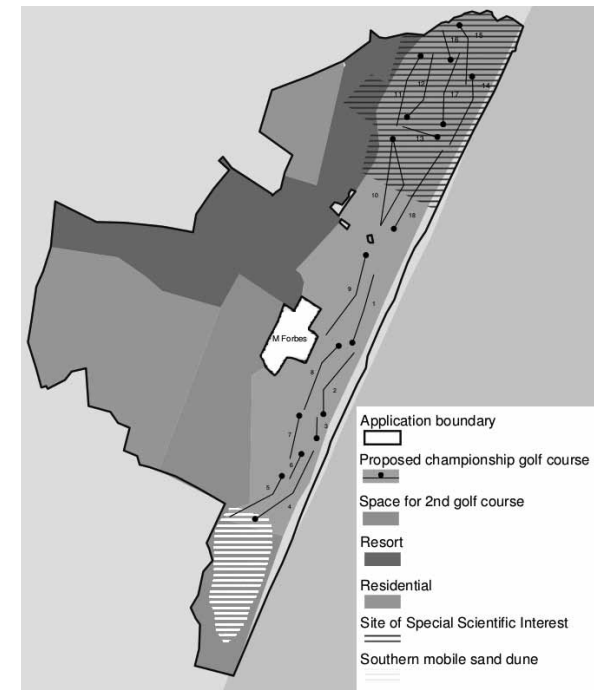
III. Foul play?

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 2005.⁷ 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".⁸ 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



Map 1: Trump Organisation development proposal in May 2008.¹ Features include the plots of the 18 hole golf course, the SSSI (in dark hatching), and the land and property of Michael Forbes who has resisted pressures to leave the location and remains a determined force against the whole development.

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.⁹ On 25 March, the petition had reached over 17,000.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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".¹² 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.¹³ 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

2005	Apr	Trump visits Menie estate.
	Oct	Scotland's First Minister McConnell meets Trump in New York.
	Jan	Talks occur between the Trump Organisation and Aberdeenshire Council officials.
2006	Mar	Trump purchases Menie estate. Trump announces plans for a golf resort.
	Apr	Trump is concerned over wind farm plans off the coast of Aberdeen. McConnell rejects claims regarding a breach of ministerial rules over his dealings with Trump.
	May	McConnell makes Trump a 'Global Scot' ambassador for Scotland. After discussions with Trump, developers of the wind farm modify plans.
	Mar	Full golf resort planning application submitted to Aberdeenshire Council.
	May	SNH advises Aberdeenshire Council against the proposal.
	Aug	SNH upholds objection to the development despite changes to the proposal.
2007	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.
	Oct	First Minister Salmond meets Trump in New York. First Minister Salmond meets Sustainable Aberdeenshire.
	Nov	Sustainable Aberdeenshire holds beach protest. Formartine Area Committee in Ellon grants outline planning approval. Aberdeenshire Council's Infrastructure Committee rejects planning approval.
	Dec	Trump Organisation states it will not appeal the rejection. Scottish Government 'calls in' decision on planning approval. Martin Ford is sacked as chairman of the Infrastructure Committee.
	Jan	Parliamentary Inquiry into Scottish Government's intervention.
2008	Mar	Parliamentary Inquiry findings are published.
	Jun	Aberdeen Public Local Inquiry – main stakeholders are heard.
	Dec	Scottish Government formally grants outline planning permission.
	Jan	Approval voted worst planning decision in the Carbuncle Awards.
2009	May	Trump Organisation again approaches remaining local residents for land purchase.
	Sep	Planning permission granted by Formartine Area Committee over land owned and occupied by locals.
	Oct	Start of preparatory earthworks on golf course site.

2010	Jan	Molly Forbes is denied an interim interdict to halt the development by Court of Session in Edinburgh.
	Mar	Detailed plan for golf resort shown at public exhibition in Newburgh.
	Apr	Vandals cause damage at Trump site.
	May	Tripping Up Trump buys land from Michael Forbes. Trump visits the site and renames the dunes 'The Great Dunes of Scotland'.
	Jun	Formartine area committee approves detailed golf course plans.
	Jul	More machinery moves in, further work occurs on the golf course.
	Oct	Trump receives honorary degree from Robert Gordon University. Former RGU principal David Kennedy hands back his honorary degree in protest. Trump Organisation seeks expenses from Molly Forbes who abandoned her legal challenge.
2011	Jan	Homeowners lodge petition to Scottish Parliament against potential compulsory purchase orders. Trump Organisation states that it has no interest in compulsory purchase orders.
	Jun	Premiere of the documentary 'You've been trumped' in UK and Canada.
	Apr	Trump appears before Scottish Parliament's Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, complaining about the offshore wind farm plans, and putting further resort development plans on hold.
2012	Jul	Official opening of golf course, driving range, golf house restaurant and shop.
	Sep	Trump Organisation places newspaper advert against wind turbines.
	Oct	Several organisations drop opposition to the wind farm. Trump Organisation calls for a public inquiry into wind farm plans.
	Nov	After the broadcast of 'You've been trumped' on BBC TV, the Grampian Police receives 276 complaints.
2013	Nov	Michael Forbes wins 'Top Scot' public vote.
	Feb	Trump submits planning application for second golf course, south of first course. Photographer Alicia Bruce's exhibition at Scottish Parliament.
	Mar	Image of proposed hotel revealed. Trump states it will only be built if wind farm plans are cancelled.
	Mar	Milne lodges petition at Scottish Parliament for public inquiry into handling around the development.
	Mar	The Scottish Government approves wind farm plans.

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

bringing £150m to the local economy and creating 400 jobs, to a £1bn investment with 6000 jobs, 1400 of which would be local and permanent.¹⁴ There is little evidence to demonstrate that any of these promises have been met, or are going to be met in the future. Trump's involvement in the turbine talks in 2006 hints that his current objections to the wind turbine plans are a potential smoke screen for his inability or unwillingness to deliver on previous promises. As his original plans continue to change (e.g. the earlier mentioned teaser image of the hotel has 140 instead of 450 bedrooms), it is conceivable that some of the most supportive politicians, civil servants and business leaders will feel by now that they too have 'been trumped'.

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".¹⁵ 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?¹⁶

d. Failing legal framework

Besides the decision-making framework, nature conservation's legal framework has failed too. The SSSI designation shows that it is susceptible to breaking when under



The southern boundary of the golf course.

Photo: Gina Maffey

pressure, which is ironic when the designation was in part meant to protect precious natural areas from development in the first place. This point is worrying when bearing in mind that SSSIs are one of the basic building blocks of the UK's nature conservation legislation. 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.

e. The corporate-political complex

Essentially, this is a typical case of the power of money and the primacy of economic growth over local people's rights and nature conservation. More specifically, and alarmingly, it shows a far-reaching intertwining of corporate business and politics. This phenomenon is not new and visible in many spheres, from natural disaster mitigation to the war industry.¹⁷ But, in the context of a globalised world, it makes

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 it 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



Fairway of the most southern hole on the left, the North Sea on the right.

be the logical and intuitive consequence of the realisation that the resources we use and the places we enjoy, all stem from nature.

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NB: All webpages were last accessed on 24-03-2013.

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The Foveran Links SSSI on the Menie Estate before the Trump golf empire got underway.

Photo: Ian Francis/RSPB

