

Dr Tom Dargie is regarded as one of Scotland's most experienced dune and machair scientists. A letter along the lines below was sent by email to the Editor of the Northern Times on Monday 8th August. It was not acknowledged. It was re-submitted to the paper's Reporter on Tuesday 9th August. That too was not acknowledged. Is the local paper neutral regarding golf development at Coul Links?

Editor, Northern Times

A Coul Response

As an environmental coastal scientist with 45 years of professional consultancy experience I have very serious doubts regarding golf development at Coul. Between 1994 and 2000 I surveyed Coul Links habitats for Scottish Natural Heritage as part of the Sand Dune Survey of Scotland, a contract that included every links golf course in Scotland. Working closely with golf course designers, I also have a track record helping dissuade some from taking a proposal further on land of nature conservation importance. This happened at Coul in the 1990s; with a further course at Durness on the An Fharaid peninsula which is a European protected site; and a further Skibo course which involved osprey and wintering bird interest plus eviction of a tenant farmer. I assisted Askernish crofters *pro bono* when their South Uist machair grazings were threatened by a golf course extension. I also acted as habitats consultant to Trump International at Menie but there my clear advice was ignored and SSSI habitats were destroyed for golf.

I have spent three weeks making a preliminary analysis of the Coul scheme made public on 13 July, using the plentiful and sound information available in the public domain. Assuming development approval, my concerns are two-fold: environmental and reputational.

The key environmental issues, to me, are as follows.

Firstly, 48 hectares of Loch Fleet SSSI dune habitat will be lost at Coul. SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) is the highest conservation designation available in UK and this status is only awarded to the very best of habitat and wildlife. This loss of land is **more than double the controversial Trump destruction to Foveran Links SSSI at Menie**. The golf footprint at Coul will be much more harmful than Trump, let's be clear.

Secondly, this habitat devastation might only be a minimum. Biblical quantities of sand (I calculate 80,000 cubic metres) will have to be excavated and moved from other dunes on site in order to raise play above the watertable of this very wet dune site.

Thirdly, annual rainfall is also increasing and wetter conditions will raise the dune water table and change dune habitat in the future. The site has become notably wetter since survey in 1994. I suspect the proposed golf course is not being designed for this future outcome and parts could become waterlogged and unplayable.

Fourthly, greens and tees are located immediately beside a coastal edge that has mostly retreated inland by various distances (2-16 metres) since 2009. This is mainly the result of storms, notably in 2012 and 2014. Such greens and tees may well be vulnerable to future wave activity which is increasingly likely with sea-level rise. If so, reactive coastal protection will be needed. This was a warning unheeded by Trump International at Menie. A tee was sited far too close to the coastal edge against professional advice and much fell into the sea. Sea wall protection has now started there. The problem with protecting only part of an eroding shore is that adjacent dunes become eroded as a result. They then need further protection and boulder walls steadily creep progressively

alongshore. This is followed by beach lowering and sediment losses (i.e. much of the sand disappears). This has already happened nearby at Golspie where erosion and flooding at the kart track and caravan site are the result of Golspie Golf Course boulder protection. Creeping boulder riprap occurred between Embo and Dornoch where the golf course frontage is almost all now artificially protected. Access to the beach here is awkward. The beach character north of Embo could change dramatically for the worst if boulder sea walls are installed. At present the beach and frontal dunes are major recreation assets to tourists and local people, as they have been for generations. Increased erosion effects are also likely in front of Grannie's Heilan' Hame. What will happen to that thriving business and important local jobs if the beach changes and serious erosion starts?

These various issues will be important considerations for the statutory agencies involved in the planning process. It will be no surprise to me if SNH and SEPA object strongly to this proposal after the detailed application is submitted. Assuming Highland Council approval, their objections will then trigger an expensive Public Local Inquiry (PLI). Our communities will be further split on this matter, with much ill-feeling.

This brings me to the reputational issue. Have the developers and local people considered the scale and effects of strong adverse publicity around a confrontational PLI? It will be seen as a re-run of the very bitter Menie Inquiry. Our quiet area will be in the full glare of the world media for the wrong reasons. Supporters of development will be accused repeatedly of environmental vandalism from many quarters. Are Dornoch and Embo prepared for the economic impact of negative news? Will that affect golf and non-golf visitor numbers? Our carefully nurtured fine golf heritage and coastal tourism may both be undermined. This could be a real dampener following the celebrations of 400 years of golf at Royal Dornoch.

Trump has not delivered on his Aberdeenshire promises, apart from a vanity-project golf course and wine tastings at Menie House. Are Dornoch and Embo really prepared to risk similar limited economic benefits for a scheme which, by changing the coast, could damage and even threaten the loss of an existing important Embo business? Today the Coul area is a resilient and unspoilt piece of coast enjoyed annually by thousands of people. Is the development worth it if it creates the burden of coastal degradation, low visitor numbers and limited jobs for future generations? Will the economic benefits really be worth the worse-than-Trump national and international criticism for destroying protected natural habitat and the wildlife it supports?

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