

Letters

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Castle Stuart and Coul no comparison

REGARDING your article "Coul plan 'is just another Trump fiasco in the making'" (NT, November 10) we commend John Finnie MSP's respectful response to local criticism of Holyrood possible intervention in the debate on the fate of Coul Links.

Jerry Bishop made remarks about "ignorance" and "false assumption" and "simplistic comparisons" with Trump and that "no one is willing to draw a comparison with ... Castle Stuart".

So, let us make the comparison. We write as two ecological surveyors, with a combined total of 70 years' professional experience, to advise readers on the conservation interest of Castle Stuart Golf Course.

Mr Bishop states that the golf course at Castle Stuart is within an SSSI and therefore assumes that golf is great for biodiversity. His reasoning is wrong. The Castle Stuart property overlaps slightly with an area of saltmarsh within the Longman and Castle Stuart Bays SSSI. The bulk of the SSSI consists of tidal mudflats outside the property and none of the SSSI

overlaps the golf course. The SSSI conservation features do not list dune habitat as an interest because there are no natural dunes on the site.

The "dunes" have been artificially constructed from material on site. The soils of Castle Stuart are derived from Ice Age sands, not sand deposited and reworked by sea and wind. It is a superb example of an artificial links golf course, with good attention paid to establishing better biodiversity. (Similarly, Kingsbarns in Fife has imported all its sand.)

The improved biodiversity at Castle Stuart, compared with intensive agriculture beforehand, is located entirely outside the adjacent SSSI.

The correct comparison for what could happen to biodiversity at Coul Links is the Trump International course at Menie, partly sited within Foveran Links SSSI. Golf development at Coul would lead to immediate habitat and topography destruction, as at Menie, followed by potential SSSI de-notification, and then mismanagement by landowners and managers

without any legal constraint. One of us knows the first part of the Menie story very well, having worked for Trump International between 2006 and early 2009 as lead ecologist, resigning after advice was ignored.

**Andrew Weston and Dr
Tom Dargle
Dornoch**

The editor welcomes letters from readers, but reserves the right to edit them. Letters must bear the name and address of the writer for publication. If possible, please include a daytime telephone number. Send them to: The Editor, Northern Times, Main Street, Golspie, Sutherland KW10 6RA, fax 01408 633028 or email: editor@northern-times.co.uk Please note the deadline for letters is noon on Tuesday.

Letters

It would be folly to reject investment in Sutherland

I REFER to the letter published last week (November 17) and to other recent articles regarding the Coul Links Golf Course proposal.

I wonder if Messrs Weston and Dargie would be courageous enough to go into the schools in East Sutherland and Easter Ross to explain to the pupils why we should reject the biggest inward capital investment to Sutherland for 100 years.

Why we should not endeavor to reverse the economic decline of this area.

And why these children must, generation after generation, leave their homeland to seek employment as there is so little opportunity for them here.

They should also explain why it would be good for their futures that they should preserve the Coul Links in their current condition and reject an investment that will have the potential to create jobs and development capable of sustaining theirs and their communities' futures for many years to come.

The developers of the proposed Coul Links Golf Course expect that their initial investment in the golf course itself will attract further inward investment, which, over 10 years, is projected to be as much as £60m, supporting around 250 full time employees jobs.

Supposing it was half that – how can we possibly afford to reject such a significant opportunity?

They might also like to explain to the children that on-going preservation of the Links will include the continuing infestation of invasive species, uncontrolled seasonal shooting of wild birds and the absolute absence of anything like a coherent long term management plan for the entire SSSI within which the Coul Links sits.

Whilst they're at it, they might also

tell the children that the proposed investment might just be the catalyst which could generate sufficient long term employment and stability that could enable them to stay, work, develop skills and raise their families within their home county – rather than join the generations before them who have had to move away to train and make their living where the jobs are.

I wonder how the children would respond. My guess is that they'd probably be pretty pleased with the idea of supporting the proposal which offers them something for their futures.

If I were in Messrs Weston and Dargie's shoes, I'd be rather ashamed of myself in my efforts to create yet another lost opportunity for their future. We all have to face up to the reality of improving economic opportunity for East Sutherland. It's not acceptable any more to deny our youngsters an improved future.

Of course we have an obligation to maintain our beautiful landscape, I would never suggest otherwise, but does the creation of a golf course replacing a few acres of scrub land really detract from our beautiful landscape? I think not – it could be argued that it would actually be an enhancement.

The proposed golf course will occupy about one per cent of the Coul Links SSSI.

I have no shame in publicly stating that I am fully in support of the proposal to build a new world class golf course at Coul Links.

The plan makes complete economic sense for us all. It also offers practical and cohesive proposals to mitigate for the environmental impact on the dune area, the works may even improve the environmental status of the area – it certainly has the potential to be economically transformational.

If you object to this proposal on some personal grounds, say so, get it out in the open and lance the problem. If you object to it on environmental grounds, say what your objections are and go to the developers and seek mitigation in their plans – any serious negotiator can always find a compromise.

But if you object to this on the basis of its socio-economic potential, then perhaps you too should visit the schools and tell the children why you want to deny them the chance of bettering themselves.

If you want to discuss economic success, go and compare the town of Dornoch, which is flourishing – largely because it has a world class golf course – with neighbouring Embo, Golspie, Brora, Helmsdale, Bonar Bridge, Rogart and Lairg. Then ask yourself why?

Frankly, any inward investment that could improve the lot of these once thriving but now struggling towns should be welcomed with open arms. What happens to the majority of the children of these towns – they go away, don't they?

Finally, Mr Keiser (one of the developers) has a most extraordinary record of success in golf course development.

His work has economically transformed several rural areas of the US. Look it up – it's there for everyone to see. Google: Kaiser's golf courses saving communities.

Reject this and I think the children of East Sutherland will be desperately disappointed in the custodians of their future.

Good luck to you Mr Warnock and Mr Keiser and thank you for wanting to invest your money and your skills in East Sutherland.

Pete Campbell
Balblair Farm
Bonar Bridge

Can we not have a sensible and fair debate?

IN response to the letter from Tom Dargie and Andrew Weston in the NT last week, whilst they are entitled to their view, they and their "Not Coul" campaign group do seem to be totally oblivious both to the overwhelming local opinion in favour of

the proposal and the detailed, positive surveys already carried out on the SSSI site by independent experts.

Are Messrs Dargie and Weston saying that they are right and everyone else is wrong?

The survey findings and mitigation proposals for Coul Links Golf are readily available on the Coul Links Golf website and have been presented to locals at a number of public meetings.

Having attended one at Dornoch, I appreciate it does not suit the "Not Coul" campaign to acknowledge a different point of view from expert external sources but surely we can have a sensible and fair debate on this?

The Coul Links Golf team have been totally approachable and transparent throughout the process but "Not Coul" are clearly not keen on scrutiny.

Having spoken to the Coul Links Golf team (which is easy to do), it seems that "Not Coul" were invited to walk the site and exchange views especially on mitigation. They declined this invitation and lost an opportunity to influence thinking.

Add to this all the misplaced lobbying mainly from south of the border and it's no wonder that their campaign is not well received by locals.

Whereas Coul Links Golf welcome all views and publishes them on their website, criticism of the "Not Coul" campaign is not welcome. The Facebook site is a "closed" site, you can only comment if you agree that you support their views.

Of course, different ecologists will have different views, as ultimately nobody knows for sure what will happen long term should Coul Links Golf get approval and be built.

What we can do in the meantime is to use our own eyes and look at the evidence of what has actually happened with golf development on other SSSI sites like Machrihanish Dunes and Askernish or frankly look at how golf and nature have co-existed so well on the links at Dornoch, Brora, Golspie and Tain for hundreds of years!

There is no issue here, no "destruction" as their scare tactics

suggest, in fact nature flourishes with amazing diversity.

What is becoming apparent is that the Coul Links SSSI site has been badly managed for decades. There is substantial damage to dunes at the Embo end of the beach due to unregulated quad bikes and other SUVs. We have invasive species such as gorse, bracken and birch covering many hectares. There is shooting of wild fowl in the key winter breeding period – why have RSPB and others allowed this to carry on for years?

If Coul Links Golf does not get approved can we expect the "Not Coul" group to step in and fund a management programme to match the one that Coul Links Golf will be putting in place?

Finally, the comparisons with the Trump development in Aberdeen made by Messrs Dargie and Weston are worthy of further scrutiny.

It is noted that Mr Dargie was a consultant on this project working for Donald Trump and whilst he apparently resigned from the project and clearly would no longer like to be associated with it, it was of course approved during his "watch".

What's even more curious is that at the enquiry into the Menie development Tom Dargie under cross examination said: "If the development gets permission to go ahead and we are allowed to undertake mitigation, we would have habitat conditions that would be better overall than what we have at the current time."

I know I'm not alone in finding this especially ironic, as locals were not in favour at Menie and made their feelings known – but Tom Dargie was working for Trump.

Locals here are overwhelmingly in favour of Coul Links Golf going ahead but despite the impressive mitigation programme proposed, Tom Dargie will not listen and now opposes.

A real case of poacher turned gamekeeper!

Ian Madeley
Elizabeth Crescent
Dornoch

Stoer skincare