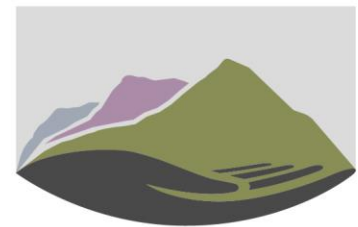


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Dear Richard Thomas

NP5/59/495A Land near Pont yr Afon Gam, Llan Ffestiniog: Proposed Hydro Electric Scheme (600KW) comprising intake weir, predominantly buried pipeline (1.2km), erection of 24m gantry bridge, turbine building, outflow, buried grid connection, vehicular access and construction compounds

The Snowdonia Society is a registered charity which for over 50 years has enabled people to take an active part in caring for and protecting Eryri through a unique mix of advocacy, volunteering and practical conservation.

The Society's object is to protect and enhance the beauty and special qualities of Snowdonia and to promote their enjoyment in the interests of all who live in, work in or visit the area both now and in the future.

The Snowdonia Society's view is that the proposed development is contrary to planning policy and is not compatible with the statutory purposes of the National Park. We object in the strongest possible terms to the application. Our comments include our concerns about impacts on and risks to cultural heritage, landscape, nature conservation features, access and enjoyment.

We are also concerned by the inadequate content of the application documents, which do not provide the necessary information on which to base a proper assessment of the impacts and risks of the proposed development.

Cymdeithas Eryri the Snowdonia Society
1967 - 2017

Yn gwarchod, gwella a dathlu Eryri ers 50 mlynedd - Protecting, enhancing and celebrating Snowdonia for 50 years

Elusen gofrestredig rhif/Registered Charity no: 1155401

1. Context

Rhaeadr y Cwm and Afon Cynfal have drawn people to them for centuries, because of their power, beauty and importance in both the natural and the cultural landscape. The power, beauty and importance of this magnificent waterfall and stretch of river will be directly damaged and diminished by this proposed development.

It is only in the last couple of decades that this stretch of river has also attracted the attention of hydro developers. An application for a run-of-river hydro scheme in the 1990s failed to gain planning permission. Large numbers of people were opposed to that proposal on the grounds of its unacceptable impacts on both landscape and nature. The current application is significantly larger in scale and therefore in its impacts.

We note that Gwynedd Council Transport and Countryside Service express concerns about the proposal and suggest that there is insufficient information in the application. They also draw attention to implications of the proposed scheme on Public Footpath number 22.

We understand that Ffestiniog Town Council at their meeting of 15th November resolved to strongly oppose the application on the grounds of its unacceptable impact on landscape and public enjoyment.

It is our understanding that a wide range of organisations active in the protection and enjoyment of National Parks, their landscapes and wildlife are also opposed to this proposed development.

Having monitored the development of hydro schemes across the National Park for almost five years we are frustrated that there is still no joined up and strategic approach to the assessment of such schemes in their location, design, planning, construction and operation. Across Wales there continues to be a misalignment of the permitting (NRW) and planning (Local Authority/NPA) processes and an unsatisfactory division of responsibilities for the assessment of landscape and ecological impacts. The strategic assessment of hydropower's place in the most sensitive habitats and most sensitive landscapes of Wales has barely progressed in those past five years.

The results of this include badly designed, badly built and badly sited schemes, and damaged habitats. In some cases bad practice has gone as far as law-breaking, resulting in a few convictions for pollution and deliberate over-abstraction of water. A much greater number of incidents have gone unnoticed, unreported or unpunished.

Over the past 5 years the building of run of river hydro schemes has resulted in almost 100 new obstructions being built on the rivers of Snowdonia. Some of these new obstructions – permitted by NRW and SNPA – will, for decades to come, contribute to the already clear declines of migratory fish. Those declines are complex but there is ample evidence that physical obstructions are a significant causal contributor.

Failure to give sufficient weight to the cumulative ecological and landscape impacts of developments like this on our rivers mirrors a global failure to protect freshwater.

The current status of Afon Cynfal is 'Moderate' in terms of Cycle 2 Water Framework Directive assessment¹, which brings with it responsibilities under EU legislation.

¹ Natural Resources Wales: Cycle 2 Rivers and waterbodies
<https://nrw.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=2176397a06d64731af8b21fd69a143f6>

The current reasons given for Afon Cynfal not achieving 'Good' WFD status² do not include any reference to hydrogeomorphology or hydropower. The proposed development is likely to impose additional negative impacts on the WFD status of the river, making it harder to improve the river's suboptimal condition status.

We query whether NRW has properly assessed the impacts on sensitive features of **long-term** 70% year-round abstraction above the Q95 'Hands-Off Flow' (HOF). We are very concerned that the short catchment and low average flow profile of this river leave it highly susceptible to ecological and geomorphological damage from the proposed abstraction regime when modelled over extended periods of time.

We doubt whether NRW are applying a model which properly reflects the degree of uncertainty in predictions of future flows, uncertainty which is magnified when modelling for a development which will operate for several decades. We therefore suggest that to ensure a sufficiently precautionary approach the National Park Authority should ask to see evidence from NRW of an assessment that uses up to date modelling in a way which is appropriate to the flow profile of this river. Without such modelling it would be unclear whether either or both authorities were compliant with the requirements of WFD. It would also be difficult to assess the proposal for significant impacts on relevant features of SACs or SSSIs downstream of the application. There is an additional need to model the impacts of reduced flow on the humidity profile in the gorge, as humidity is a key requirement for the nationally significant bryophyte assemblage in the gorge.

2. Cultural heritage

Blodeuedd, Lleu, Goronwy and Gwydion are important characters across a thousand years of Welsh culture, linked forever to the waters of the Afon Cynfal which run through the fourth branch of the Mabinogi.

Llyn y Morynion, Afon Bryn Saeth, and Llech Gronw are among the specific places we can visit today that conjure in our imagination the ancient stories of the Mabinogi. When we go to these places we are linked by them, through time, to the great legends and literature inspired by Snowdonia's real landscapes. The freshwater landscape of Afon Cynfal is at the core of one of the oldest literary traditions in western Europe.

It is our responsibility today to respect and protect these irreplaceable strands of cultural inheritance.

The proposed development would neither respect nor protect the cultural heritage of this part of Snowdonia. It would instead introduce jarring industrial development into a landscape where the Welsh identity is deeply rooted.

A concrete and steel dam would break the flow of Afon Cynfal. Most of the freshwater of the river would be taken from its bed and forced through a giant 1.2km plastic pipeline. The river would be physically diminished over its most spectacular reach, all the way down the falls and into the gorge. An ugly metal gantry bridge 80 feet in length would bisect the gorge, break up its natural lines and detract from its currently unspoilt beauty.

² Natural Resources Wales 'Reasons for Not Achieving Good'
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2hsDbbdxz1tMmUzY0ZPV093NEk/view>

We believe that no development can be of greater importance than the protection of this unique cultural landscape, a piece of the ancient heart of Wales, at the root of its people and our language.

3. Landscape and access

The proposal is contrary to Eryri Local Development Plan (ELDP) Development Policy 2: Development and the Landscape.

It would introduce significant built structures into an area of outstanding beauty. The structures include concrete and steel weir, plastic pipeline, metal gantry bridge, outfall and turbine and metering buildings. Both separately and taken together, these structures would significantly detract from the natural beauty and sense of place.

The impact of the depletion of the river's flow by 70% above Q95/HOF would in our view be a highly significant and unacceptable impact on the views and visual qualities of the waterfalls and gorge. The application documents make no attempt to address the landscape and visual impacts of the depletion of the waterfall system. We therefore believe that permitting this depletion would be contrary to planning policy in a National Park famed for its waterfalls.

The degree of impact of water depletion on the scenic quality of the waterfall system is compounded by the proximity of the specially created public viewpoint and public footpath.

The proposal includes provision to dig up at least 300m of Public Footpath 22. We can see no evidence that a safe alternative route for footpath users has been considered or identified for use during the construction period. Public Footpath 22 is also part of the successful promoted walking route - Snowdonia Slate Trail - further evidence of the existing importance and economic value of the high-quality landscapes of this area.

The proposal is to bury the pipeline along the length of this section of public footpath. From our site visits we suggest that this will only be possible with very substantial removal of bedrock by rockpecker and/or by blasting. This would represent a further act of desecration of Snowdonia's cultural landscape. The application gives no assurance that any ground investigation has taken place. With scant regard for the practical challenges and associated risks, the application does not provide a safe basis on which to permit the proposal to proceed – regardless of the policy issues which it raises.

4. Nature conservation features

The proposed development site sits between and therefore links ecologically two separate nature conservation sites designated nationally and internationally as SSSI, SAC and SPA. Any development on this site could have impacts downstream on the Cwm Cynfal SSSI/SAC which is listed in NRW's database³ as one of the five most important sites in Wales for its bryophyte communities.

³ Hyperoceanic bryophyte site rankings – excel spreadsheet from NRW.

We can see nothing in the application documents which suggests that the importance and sensitivity of this downstream site has been recognised, taken seriously and incorporated into the scheme design.

We can see no evidence that the proposed design and construction method would provide any protection whatsoever against the well-known risks of pollution and damage to this site and the designated areas downstream, as occurred, for example when the much smaller Afon Las hydro scheme was built, with significant pollution impacts on the downstream Llyn Padarn SSSI.

The depleted reach of river created by the proposed development is itself of national importance, though undesignated. We note the following comments from Dr Des Callaghan in the bryophyte survey⁴ supplied as part of the application:

'The length of the Afon Cynfal within the survey area supports a rich assemblage of oceanic bryophytes that is of national conservation importance, including Paraleptodontium recurvifolium and the Oceanic Ravine Bryophyte assemblage listed under Section 42 of the NERC Act 2006. The main area of interest is within the deep ravine system, especially the steep N-facing rockfaces that border the river. The present survey results show, according to the scoring system of Bosanquet (2011), that the area ranks about 20th in Wales with regards to its importance for oceanic bryophytes (S.D.S. Bosanquet, pers. comm.)'

'Within the depleted length of the Afon Cynfal a nationally important oceanic bryophyte assemblage occurs, concentrated deep within the main ravine.'

'A 2 km length of the Afon Cynfal will have a depleted flow when the proposed HEP scheme is in operation.'

'Some possible effects on colonies of bryophytes from reduced flows include: (i) an increase in the frequency, length and severity of desiccation events; and (ii) a reduction in the frequency, length and severity of disturbance events. Such impacts, if they occur, could cause a reduction in the population of a particular species along the depleted stream length, or even its complete loss. Attempting to predict what may happen to any particular species is clearly very difficult, but in general there will be a higher risk to those that are tied most closely to the river hydrology.'

We have previously failed to convince NRW of the need to take a more precautionary approach to the protection of the gorge features of Snowdonia, which represent some of our richest Celtic rainforest biodiversity hotspots. We continue to look to the relevant authorities to address this challenge – to recognise that the operation of some hydropower schemes poses a long-term threat to the most sensitive habitats in Snowdonia.

5. Conclusion

The proposed development is one of the largest schemes to come forward in Snowdonia in the hydropower industry's recent period of rapid growth driven by Feed-In Tariff subsidies.

Afon Cynfal is one of few 'suitable' locations for this industry which have not yet been developed, despite previous applications. In our view there are a number of reasons why it should not be developed. The river, waterfall system and gorge are too important and valuable in terms of their cultural heritage, landscape, access and conservation to be damaged and depleted.

⁴ http://planning.snowdonia-npa.gov.uk/swiftlg_snpa/MediaTemp/16603-70202.pdf

It would be, we hope, an unthinkable idea to divert the Afon Aber and run Rhaeadr Fawr/Aber Falls through a black plastic pipe. It should be equally unthinkable to do such a thing to the waters of Afon Cynfal which have flowed unhindered since they were woven into the words of - and later written into - the Mabinogion.

There is no doubt that the proposed scheme would have significant negative impacts on landscape, access and public enjoyment during its construction phase. The construction phase also carries a risk of catastrophic damage to nature conservation features of national and international importance within and downstream of the development site. There is no evidence that these risks have been taken seriously in the application documents.

We also believe that the depletion of the river could have long-term negative impacts on nature conservation features of at least national importance, including the bryophyte assemblage in the gorge. In our view this risk needs to be assessed in planning as we do not believe that it has been adequately assessed in the water abstraction permitting process.

The development would continue to have significant negative impacts on landscape and public enjoyment when in operation over a period of decades. The ongoing impacts would be from depletion of the river/waterfall system, and from the imposition of new and highly intrusive built structures into a sensitive and high-quality landscape.

We trust you will give our comments and our objection serious consideration.

Yours

John Harold

Cyfarwyddwr – Director

Cymdeithas Eryri – Snowdonia Society