

Response to the Landscape Institute Webinar

Visualisation: SNH Guidance on the visual representation of wind farms.

by Alan Macdonald

My attention has been drawn by a number of people to the [Landscape Institute webinar](#) on YouTube which was broadcast to members on the 21st January 2016 presented by Mr Brendan Turvey, Renewable Energy Policy and Advice Manager for Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) on the subject of Visualisation: SNH visual representation of wind farms (2014). The presentation was followed by a 30-minute question and answer session. I would like to correct certain points raised in Mr Turvey's presentation and during the question and answer session. It is not my intention to reiterate the issues which are contained in my book or in my Review of the SNH Guidance.

Mr Turvey states at webinar **22.40** that the supporting evidence for their new guidance is the extensive research work undertaken by The Highland Council which is also explained in detail in my book. What SNH and the Landscape Institute have failed to understand is that the object of commissioning the University of Stirling to undertake the landscape focal length study was to provide the viewer with an image which gave a reliable impression of scale as seen from the actual viewpoint without the need to visit the site. As I have already explained elsewhere, in a photograph which contains linear perspective, if we show context we do so at the expense of our perception of distance and scale, and if we show a reliable impression of distance and scale, we do so at the expense of context.

The Highland Council Standards (HCS) which have been successfully developed, tried and tested over seven years make allowances for both while retaining the convenient A3 format where the images are clearly identified from each other because they are designed for different audiences. The single frame images for visual impact assessment are included in the Environmental Statement in addition to the panoramas showing the wider landscape context¹. Where the full extent of the windfarm cannot be contained within the single frame or where cumulative issues are involved over a much wider field of view, the image can be viewed in a single frame panoramic viewer where the 75mm focal length is controlled by computer and the image can be panned on a computer screen in the same way as we would rotate our head to scan the real landscape.

At webinar **55.25**, Mr Turvey states that *'any photomontage can be viewed incorrectly either through ePlanning or in a local newspaper or indeed if a member of the public prints it at the wrong size'* and goes on to state that *'even the A3 images that the Highland Council specify can be printed at the wrong size and also misused'*. This is a misleading statement as the single frame images in the Highland Council Standards can be viewed at any size and any distance without misinterpretation. Whether viewed in a newspaper, on a computer screen or as a print, our perception of scale and distance within the image frame remains the same because the three fields of view which define the focal length remain constant (Review **page 12**, para. 5).

This is not the case with the images conforming to the SNH Guidance because they are using one large A1 wide format for two entirely different forms of assessment. Unless the panoramas are printed to the correct size and viewed at a comfortable arm's length, they are highly misleading. If printed in a newspaper or viewed on a computer screen through an ePlanning portal or from a DVD which is the way they are generally viewed by the wider audience, they seriously under-represent our perception of scale and distance (Review **Fig.17** and **Fig.18**). Single frame images which give a realistic impression of scale and distance are excluded from the Environmental Statement and only available in a printed viewpoint pack containing selected images which has to be obtained from the local community council.

¹ (139) and (141) of the SNH Guidance states that the panoramas showing landscape and visual context should be used as a reference only, so it is not necessary to have a fixed image size.

I would also like to address the question from 'Graham' at webinar **52.25** as to whether I should make my conflict of interest clearer '*as someone who financially benefits from the adoption of the THC guidance*'. Clearly, he has not read my book. Since relocating my visualisation company to the UK in 2002, I have always used 75mm single frame images for the visual impact assessment of windfarms, some seven years before the Highland Council Standards were first published in 2009 and ten years before the University of Stirling Study. This was based on my own site tests and SNH's recommendation in 2001² that a single frame image with a focal length '*of up to 80mm*' gave the best representation of landscape scale. I therefore do not see how I can be accused of any conflict of interest when I have been using the same visualisation technique for fourteen years regardless of what any other research or guidance may state.

I would also like to mention that the HCS were first drawn up by Gordon Mooney, the Council's principal planner at the time who undertook extensive research and empirical testing of the visualisations submitted with windfarm applications and found them to be seriously flawed and highly misleading. This also happened to concur with my own independent research. In the later updates which were illustrated, I was commissioned by the Council to provide any technical advice and illustrations required.

As I assume that 'Graham' has read my Review of the SNH 2014 guidance, I would therefore suggest that he should, instead, direct his conflict of interest concerns to SNH and the Landscape Institute.

At webinar **39.23**, Mr Turvey also expresses his disappointment in my criticism of SNH and suggests that I appear to think there is a '*conspiracy*' going on. At no time have I ever suggested that. What I have stated is that SNH have steered a preconceived idea from the outset, selectively taking aspects of the HCS which were taken out of their original context to support their case.

In October 2012, SNH were informed by The Highland Council's representative on their steering group that '*this has gone far enough*'.³ SNH then went over the head of the officer and held a private meeting with the Council's Head of Planning in an attempt to elicit agreement on their draft proposals.⁴ In September 2013, the Council finally informed SNH by letter that they could not support their proposals.⁵ While such unprofessional pressure tactics may be acceptable to SNH and the Landscape Institute, it has no place in a collaborative or transparent consultation process.

Alan Macdonald
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² '*Guidelines on the Environmental Impacts of Windfarms and Small Scale Hydroelectric Schemes*' published by Scottish Natural Heritage in 2001.

^{3,4&5} Confirmed in correspondence obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.