



Media Release

Contact: Rory Syme, 0131 312 4742 / 07909 856 984

Scottish Government urged to step in to save Coul Links

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Image showing Coul Links must be credited to Craig Allardyce -

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The fate of one of Scotland's most important dune habitats now lies with Scottish Ministers after Highland Council voted to approve plans for a golf course at Coul Links near Embo in East Sutherland this afternoon (20 June 2018).

The Council's planning committee has approved the application on an internationally protected site against the recommendation of their own officials, in addition to a statutory objection from Scottish Natural Heritage.

A coalition of environmental groups has been campaigning to save Coul Links from these proposals and is strongly critical of the failure of the planning committee to give due consideration to need to refuse the application because of its environmental impact. They are now calling on Scottish Ministers to save the Coul Links from being permanently damaged by the construction of the golf course.

Jonny Hughes, Chief Executive of the Scottish Wildlife Trust said: "Consenting these plans against the recommendation of council officials and against policies that are designed to ensure the protection of our natural heritage completely undermines the credibility of the planning process and creates future uncertainty for both local communities and developers across Scotland. We trust Scottish Ministers will now do the right thing and step in to avoid irreparable damage to Scotland's reputation for environmental leadership internationally."

Aedán Smith, Head of Planning and Development at RSPB Scotland said: "We urge Scottish Ministers to call in the application, to ensure Coul Links is safeguarded for wildlife and people, both now and in the future. This is their opportunity to prove that there is substance and meaning to their assurances that Scotland will continue to uphold and enforce its international nature conservation obligations. Please do take a moment to fill in the e-action and help us do all we can to save Coul Links."

Paul Kirkland of Butterfly Conservation Scotland said: "We are hugely disappointed that Highland councillors have yet again ignored their own expert's advice, and their biodiversity duty, to approve this awful proposal. The site supports butterflies such as the Small Blue and Northern Brown Argus, that are already threatened in other parts of Scotland, together with one Red Data Book moth and a dozen that are nationally scarce. We now look to Ministers to call the application in to assess this proposal objectively."

Craig Macadam, Conservation Director of Buglife said: "Today's decision threatens the unique assemblage of plants and animals that call Coul Links home. Once these habitats and the species that live there are lost, there is no second chance. Scottish Ministers must call in this application to ensure that the wildlife of these dunes is saved for future generations."

Stuart Brooks, Head of Natural Heritage Policy at the National Trust for Scotland said: "Scotland's world class wild landscapes and wildlife are at risk again from development. By approving this scheme in the face of public opposition and against the recommendation of the Government's natural heritage advisors the Scottish Government must now intervene to protect the site in the national interest."

Calum Duncan, Head of Conservation Scotland, Marine Conservation Society said: "We are bitterly disappointed with this anachronistic decision. The Coul Links dunes should be celebrated for the precious wild space they currently are, a status they are now set to lose, that can be enjoyed responsibly by everyone, including most importantly for local benefit. A holistic approach to encourage visitors, especially with the profile of the North Coast 500, should celebrate these as amongst the last and best examples of this precious dune habitat, and the boost to health and wellbeing a visit there could provide. Instead unique wildlife will be threatened, the wildness of the dunes trashed and the opportunity for inclusive recreational access diminished."

Alistair Whyte, Head of Plantlife Scotland said: "Coul Links is the last stronghold and safe haven for many of Scotland's threatened wild plants such as lesser butterfly orchid, coral root orchid, moonwort and star of Bethlehem, this is one of many reasons government advisors quite rightly uphold their recommendation not to proceed with this development. The Scottish Government must intervene to save these wild plants and the wonders of this wild landscape."

The plans for the course had been recommended for refusal by officials as they are contrary to Highland Council's development plan due to the "significant and permanent loss of sand dune habitat". They also highlighted that '...Coul Links support some of the best quality SSSI dune slack habitats in Scotland'.

The proposal had received unprecedented levels of opposition with over 1,800 objections lodged with Highland Council, and one petition gaining over 89,000 signatures. Objectors included many local people and local groups such as the Tain and District Field Club and local campaign group Not Coul, as well as Scotland's national statutory nature conservation advisors Scottish Natural Heritage, the international IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas and numerous national environmental groups.

Due to the severe damage that would be caused to internationally important wildlife habitats, the decision cannot be issued until Scottish Ministers have had an opportunity to consider the proposals. Ministers now have the opportunity to step in and save the site by calling in the application.

An e-action has been launched by RSPB Scotland urging people to contact their MSPs to call in the application. It can be found at <https://goo.gl/zqgzbf>

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Buglife is the only organisation in Europe devoted to the conservation of all invertebrates. We're actively working to save Britain's rarest little animals, everything from bees to beetles, worms to woodlice and jumping spiders to jellyfish. Our aim is to halt the extinction of invertebrate species and to achieve sustainable populations of invertebrates.

Butterfly Conservation is the UK charity dedicated to saving butterflies, moths and our environment. Our research provides advice on how to conserve and restore habitats. We run projects to protect more than 100 threatened species and we are involved in conserving hundreds of sites and reserves. www.butterfly-conservation.org

Marine Conservation Society

The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) is the UK charity dedicated to protecting our seas, shores and wildlife. MCS campaigns for clean seas and beaches, sustainable fisheries, and protection of marine life. Through education, community involvement and collaboration, MCS raises awareness of the many threats that face our seas and promotes individual, industry and government action to protect the marine environment. MCS provides information and guidance on many aspects of marine conservation and produces the annual Good Beach Guide, the Good Fish Guide for sustainable seafood advice, as well as promoting public participation in volunteer projects such as the Great British Beach Clean and Basking Shark Watch. MCS has a dedicated Scotland conservation programme based from our Edinburgh office that was established in April 2000. www.mcsuk.org.

National Trust for Scotland

The National Trust for Scotland is the charity that celebrates and protects Scotland's heritage. It relies on the support of its 400,000 members and donors to carry out its important work of caring for the natural and built heritage of Scotland for everyone to enjoy.

Plantlife is the organisation speaking up for the nation's wild flowers, plants and fungi. We work hard to protect wild plants on the ground and to build understanding of the vital role they play in everyone's lives. We manage nature reserves, influence policy and legislation, run events and activities that connect people with their local wild plants and work with others to promote the conservation of wild plants for the benefit of all.

RSPB Scotland

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with our partners, we protect threatened birds and wildlife so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We play a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust:

- The Scottish Wildlife Trust is Scotland's leading nature conservation charity, representing over 40,000 members who care for wildlife and the natural environment.
- For over 50 years, Trust has worked with its members, partners and supporters in pursuit of its vision of healthy, resilient ecosystems across Scotland's land and seas.
- The Trust successfully champions the cause of wildlife through policy and campaigning work, demonstrates best practice through practical conservation and innovative partnerships, and inspires people to take positive action through its education and engagement activities.
- The Trust manages a network of 120 wildlife reserves across Scotland and is a member of the UK-wide Wildlife Trusts movement.
- The Trust receives financial assistance and support from a range of organisations, funders and individuals including Scottish Natural Heritage and players of People's Postcode Lottery.