British Lichen Society

The British Lichen Society
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The Head of Planning and Building Standards
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Dear Sir/Madam

17/04601/FUL Development of 18-hole golf course, etc.

The British Lichen Society (BLS) wish to register an objection to the proposed planned 18-hole golf course at Coul Links, part of Loch Fleet SSSI (Highland Council Planning Application 17/04601/FUL). We consider that from the point of view of lichen interest at Coul Links, the case made by the ES was not sufficient, and we should respond on behalf of the lichens. The consultancy report did not adequately acknowledge the lichen interest and there seems to have been little effort to gain more information, either by contacting the BLS or commissioning a specialist survey of the site. The SNH case for objecting to the development on the basis of the lichen interest is very good, and Dr David Genney of SNH (Genney 2017) recommended a specialist survey to enable a full assessment of the lichen interest and a better understanding of likely impacts of the proposed development.

The lichenological importance of Coul Links has long been known. In a report to the then Nature Conservancy Council, on a *Survey and Assessment of Lowland Heath, Dune and Machair Lichen Habitats in the UK*, the BLS assessed Ferry-Coul Links as of National [UK] importance (Fletcher *et al*. 1984). Their closing comment was "The site is unique, of Oceanic Northern Dunes type and is reminiscent of some features of Culbin, Forvie and Cuthill Links. It stands alone, however, no back-up sites can be suggested." After 34 years this assessment has not changed.

Fryday (1991) carried out a rather cursory survey of only the northern part of Coul Links, and recorded much of it as rather 'disappointing' compared to Ferry Links, but he did not record 3 of the Red-listed species recorded between 2016–18 and this probably reflects the limited areas visited by him. Nevertheless, Fryday did record the Red-listed *Cladonia mitis*, further to the north.

More recently, the site has been visited by staff from SNH (October 2017), and Stewart Taylor (December 2017). These visits were of a walk-over nature, but certainly raised awareness of the potential lichen importance of Coul Links by finding nationally important populations of the rare and endangered lichen *Peltigera malacea*

and the nationally scarce *Peltigera neckeri* (Halfhide 2017, Genney 2017, Stewart Taylor pers. com.).

The 2018 field visit to Coul Links

The BLS were concerned that the lichen interest of the site may be somewhat under represented, given that there has been no comparable full lichen survey similar to that afforded to Ferry Links to the north (Coppins & Coppins 1998). Consequently, a brief visit to the site was made on 3rd May 2018 by four members of the BLS: Andy Acton, Paul Cannon (current President BLS), Brian Coppins and Heather Paul, accompanied by local ecologist and expert on dune systems, Tom Dargie. There was not time for a full lichen survey, but we aimed to cover some ground not covered by David Genney and Stewart Taylor in October and December 2017 respectively. Some of the locations for the proposed golf greens, fairways and access tracks were also included in our walk-over. GIS readings were taken of locations of notable species and are shown in **Figs 1 & 2**. Although the distribution of lichen interest will inevitably partly reflect recording effort, it is clear that the footprints of the proposed greens, fairways and access tracks coincide with some key areas of high lichen interest.

The visit confirmed that the site was under-recorded as we added 34 species to the site total, including 14 terricolous lichens (soil growing species), 7 epiphytic lichens (growing on plants, mostly on *Calluna*), 3 saxicolous lichens (growing on rocks, on shingle at northern end) and 10 lichenicolous fungi (growing on lichens). Much of the site is still unexplored and more species can be expected to occur there.

We also recorded more locations for the priority species, *Peltigera malacea* (**Figs. 4 & 5**), and also for other notables, namely *Leptogium palmatum* and *Stereocaulon condensatum*. (**Figs. 6 & 8**). Notable new finds at Coul were *Massalongia carnosa* (elsewhere in dunes systems only at Findhorn), *Polychidium muscicola* and *Bryobilimbia sanguineoatra*, the last two being new finds for a dune system anywhere in the British Isles, their usual habitat being mossy tree trunks or rocks in oceanic areas of the western Highlands. These emphasise the uniqueness of the Loch Fleet dune system. More expected additions were *Cladonia rangiferina*, *C. uncialis* subsp. *uncialis* and *C. zopfii*.

Lichen importance of the Loch Fleet SSSI dunes system in a national context.

The combined total number of terricolous lichens [lichens growing on the ground, on mineral soil, sand or decaying vegetation] at Loch Fleet is 101 species , the highest total found at any coastal dune system in the British Isles. **We would reiterate and strongly endorse the comments made by Genney (2017), that both parts of the dune systems within Loch Fleet SSSI must be considered as a whole: the two halves of the Loch Fleet SSSI are complementary to one another, as both have features not found in the other. Ferry Links has a total of 87, with 31 not found on Coul Links, whereas Coul Links, with a total of 71, has 14 lichens not found on Ferry Links (see Table 2).**

[The SSSI total is arrived at by taking the 87 species found at Ferry Links, and adding the 14 additional species found at Coul Links, = 101].

In this overall total of 101 terricolous species, there are 17 notable species (see **Table 1**) including four Red-listed species. The four Red-listed species are also Scottish