

# **NOT COUL PRESS RELEASE**

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## **ECOLOGY SUPPORT FOR CHAMPIONSHIP GOLF COURSE AT COUL LINKS IS PROBABLY NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE**

The full details of the proposed championship golf development at Coul Links in Sutherland have now been available for a week. Two thirds of the course will be sited on dunes in Loch Fleet SSSI, which is also within a Special Protection Area under the European Birds Directive and a wetland site under the Ramsar Convention. This controversial scheme marks a step change in golfing use of protected land. Following the Trump development at Menie Links in Aberdeenshire, wealthy golf entrepreneurs Mike Kaiser and Todd Warnock, working with a local landowner and the Embo Trust are proposing a course on land protected under international legislation and treaty. Inevitably there is a comparison with the controversial Trump course at Menie but at Coul ecological work by the developers is claiming that the dunes have limited conservation interest and are in poor condition due to years of no management. Restored dune condition managed well around a world-class golf course is being offered by the developers, alongside the largest-ever socio-economic investment in the local area and regional economy.

The Not Coul response on ecology is led by Dr Tom Dargie, perhaps Scotland's expert on dune habitats (he has mapped most of their 50,000 ha extent). He was lead ecologist for the development at Menie, including the 2008 public inquiry. He lives a mile from the dunes at Coul and has been preparing to oppose this scheme for over a year, respecting their undeveloped, wet and stable character which sets them apart from any other dune site in Scotland.

The developers are claiming minimum impact and a net biodiversity gain in the medium term, with the golf course supposed to avoid all important species and wet dune. Instead, Dr Dargie found that the first hole he examined had more than 100 juniper bushes parked on its southern fairway, some very large. Dune juniper is one of the rarest habitats in Britain, confined to the Moray Firth and with its second largest population at Coul. More than half of that population will be lost to golf, on just a single hole. On an adjacent hole he was even more surprised. About half of the fairway was very wet dune and part of it contained a rare British wetland containing the plant Shoreweed. This is the first site on the Scottish mainland where this habitat has been found. It was not present when the site was last surveyed, it was not reported by the developers and is part of evidence that Coul is getting wetter due to climate change. Wet ground has increased by 5% to 27% since 1994 and is the result of increased summer rainfall.

An audit of the developers' habitat survey shows that overall accuracy was only 55%, suggesting that the wrong habitats had been used elsewhere. A simple split into wet and dry dune showed that only 58% of mapped wet ground was correct – the remainder had been described as dry. This explains the large area of wet habitat on the fairway with Shoreweed. Dr Dargie believes that much of the developers' ecology can now be picked to pieces. This audit approach will then be taken to other sections of the application, including economics, transport and coastal erosion. Not Coul is working with several national wildlife groups led by RSPB and information on flaws in the developer claims will be exchanged. A very strong resistance to this development is planned.

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