

Environmental Advice at Powharnal Opencast Scottish Coal

Scottish Coal is the largest coal mining company in Scotland. The coal it extracts from opencast mines at sites across central Scotland is used primarily for electricity generation, and plays an important part in meeting the government's policy for a secure and diverse energy supply. Because the life of each mine is limited, the company is always seeking opportunities to develop new sites and extend existing ones. Each new site or site extension requires thorough environmental impact assessment and careful design to make it environmentally acceptable and to ensure that potential environmental benefits are achieved. Entec has worked with Scottish Coal on the assessment and design of several sites, and is retained by the company to advise on ecology and archaeology issues, both of which can be critical for consent or expensive to resolve. Ecology, in particular, can be a 'show-stopper' if not addressed appropriately.

One of Scottish Coal's most promising prospective sites is at Powharnal, near Muirkirk in East Ayrshire, where a relatively small extension to the existing Gasswater opencast will enable the extraction of around 7 million tonnes of coal in an economically favourable way. The Powharnal site, however, is in an area of upland that is internationally important for its breeding birds, and part of the site falls within the Muirkirk and North Lowther Hills Proposed Special Protection Area (pSPA) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Entec was engaged to undertake a suite of baseline environmental studies, including surveys of birds, mammals and vegetation, and prepared a series of mitigation measures including a restoration plan aimed firmly at providing improved habitat for birds. Entec also put together the Environmental Statement

accompanying the planning application. Following objections from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Scottish Coal spent a further two years undertaking detailed studies on the ecology of the principal bird species affected - the hen harrier - in order to address these. Entec advised on the scope of these studies, and devised a successful approach to wading bird habitat creation that has been trialled on the Gasswater site. In 2002 Entec contributed to the preparation of a twenty-year monitoring plan and the revised restoration plans and mitigation proposals that have accompanied the resubmitted planning application.

An opencast coal mine in an ecologically sensitive location

