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Minister for Environment and Climate Change
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26 February 2014

Dear Douglas

Thank you for your letter of 21 January 2014 regarding the poisoned golden eagle "Fearnan".

I acknowledge and welcome that you condemn the appalling and barbaric actions that led to the poisoning of this young bird and wish to see the perpetrator(s) brought to justice. I can see also that law-abiding sporting estate managers and owners will be dismayed by this crime and the damage it will do to their reputations – in fact I would go as far as to say only the most short-sighted would disagree with that assessment. I recognise that the sporting industry is very important for Scotland's rural economy and that it must be seen to operate in a way that is above reproach to ensure our image abroad as a country which values and looks after its natural environment.

However, I would like to take this opportunity to be frank with you. The latest incident is far from the first. There has in fact been a catalogue of incidents associated with the Angus Glens area. Some of them were high profile such as the poisoning of the golden eagle "Alma" but also others which were not publicised. I understand in fact that there has been something like a dozen incidents in this area since 2008. More widely, the publication of the maps of poisoning hotspots shows the great majority of poisoning incidents are in areas associated with sporting management. It will be instructive to map the other illegal trapping and shooting incidents to see if the pattern is repeated.

In the absence of any other credible explanation, I can only conclude that, despite all our efforts, there remains an element of sporting managers and owners who continue to flout the law and defy public opinion for their own selfish ends with little regard to wildlife or the reputation of their law abiding compatriots.

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I understand your point about sporting managers not targeting golden eagles because they will keep tend to buzzards and other raptors away from their territories. However the point about poisoning is that it is a threat to a range of species, and even if eagles are not the target, they can easily become collateral damage victims. I am also well aware that anybody deliberately flouting the law and risking serious penalties is likely to make efforts to remove any evidence of wrong-doing before it is discovered. There has to remain a real suspicion therefore that if a few carcasses and baits are discovered that this probably represents only a fraction of those put out and recovered by the perpetrators.

As you know, but I am happy to reiterate it to be clear, I support the Wildlife Estates Scotland initiative and I would welcome meaningful further conservation measures for golden eagles in the Angus glens. But as I am sure you will be aware the key issue for all of us will remain bringing the deliberate illegal and self-defeating killing of raptors, whether golden eagles, hen harries, buzzards or other raptor species, to an end.

You will have seen my comments about allowing the measures currently in place or being put in place to have a chance to take effect. I think this is the right approach. I am also reluctant to impose any burdens on law-abiding businesses. But you will be aware that the pressure to impose further measures will grow unless these incidents stop. In the meantime I appreciate the support of SLE within PAW Scotland. But it would also be helpful to see more public condemnation of these crimes from members of the sporting community. The impression that is often given is of defensiveness and resentment rather than a determination to sort out the issue which only damages, unfairly, the reputation of the vast majority of estates that are law abiding..

I have been frank in setting out my views, and I expect you will wish to take issue with some of the comments I make. But I think it is better that you understand our perspective and that no-one is any doubt about our determination to deal with this issue that has gone on for far too long.

Kind regards



PAUL WHEELHOUSE