

St Fittick's Park: a Nature Reserve or an Industrial Energy Transition Zone?

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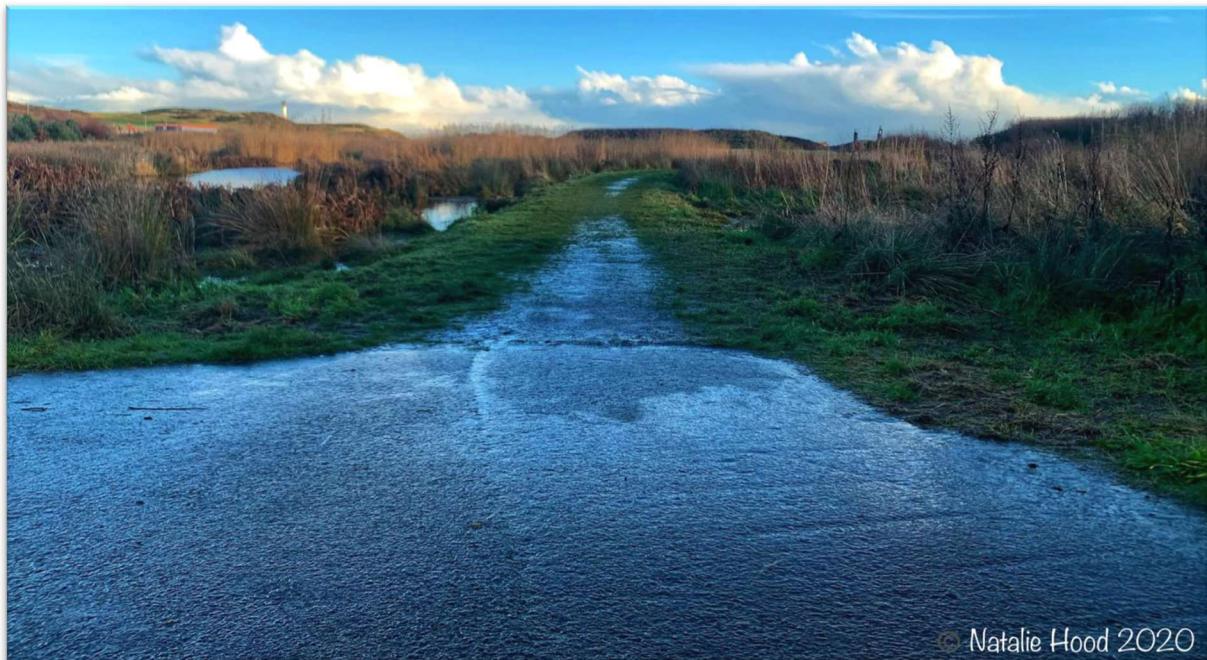
You could be forgiven for not knowing about Aberdeen's award-winning wetland and reedbeds in the south of the city. Squashed between Industrial land, sewage works and one of the most deprived communities in Scotland, St Fittick's Park is a (now threatened) brainchild of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) as a way of making space for biodiversity and for protecting the local people.

The park is a relatively small urban green space right next to Torry; a community whose eastern section bordering onto the park is one of the 10 most deprived in Scotland. Being the only accessible greenspace to this vulnerable area (which is predominantly tower blocks and flats), the park is the community's garden and its little piece of wild land, much loved and much used. It benefits people in Torry in all the ways that have become so obvious to all of us over the past year, providing relief and access to nature – particularly as the disproportionate effects of COVID on the poor have taken such a toll.

In stark contrast to the grey, cold heavy industry surrounding it, the park is a vibrant, varied place with a range of habitats to serve the local people. There are, of course, areas of traditional park, with fields of cut grass and play areas for children, a skatepark, and paths for people to walk and cycle on. Outside of these usual areas though, is where St Fittick's really shines. It boasts areas of woodland, wet meadow, reedbed and diverse dry grasslands. As you can imagine from such a range of habitats - the biodiversity supported is immense. Over 40 species of bird breed in its grounds annually, including nine red list species and eight amber, at least 116 plant species including a wonderful array of orchids, and hundreds of invertebrate species that are still being documented. Otter can also be found hunting through the reeds!

In terms of numbers of species supported – there really isn't anywhere else like it in the city of Aberdeen. In autumn months the site serves as a vital stopover point for tens of thousands of migratory birds (over the migration period – not all at once!), dragonflies, and moths. Long and short eared owls pass through the area regularly for several months, and over winter St Fittick's supports a substantial snipe population. The hard work put in by Aberdeen Ranger service and SEPA have really paid off – the burn is a richly diverse, and now award-winning wetland. The latest award is as winner of the Biodiversity and Climate Change category in the RSPB's Nature Scot awards 2020.

Whilst this area of the city has always been a wetland, the quality of the area hasn't always been as high. In 2010 Aberdeen City Council's Open Spaces audit identified severe heavy metal pollution in the straightened East Tullos burn flowing through the Park on its way from the East Tullos industrial estate (just west of where the park is) to the Bay of Nigg – and out to sea. With frequent flooding, low biodiversity, heavy pollution, and poor access. Aberdeen city council (ACC) and SEPA instigated a programme of improvements: community tree planting, returning East Tullos Burn to its original meandering course, creating reedbeds to reduce flooding and as a natural urban draining system to protect local people from the heavy metal contaminants, by soaking up the pollution. This project involved heavy groundwork and £364,000 of public money.



By this stage, you be thinking “well this is fantastic! Why am I only hearing about this now?”. Well, tragically, this area is now under the looming threat of industrial development as an opportunity site in the City’s Proposed Local Development Plan. Being sandwiched between the largest marine construction project in the UK immediately to the east, a sewage works, two industrial estates in much need of regeneration and an incinerator, the future is alarmingly uncertain for this vital community greenspace.

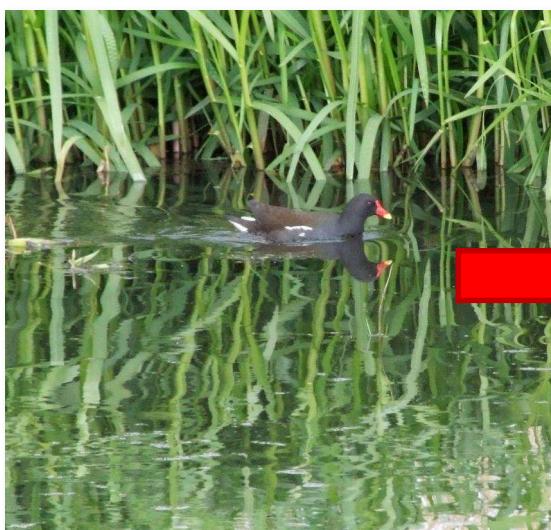
Upon finding out the threat, we commissioned an ecological report, which found that there is nowhere with higher biodiversity than the park anywhere in Aberdeen. The wildness of much of the wetlands and rough grass, what can be seen there, amazes first time visitors to it from other parts of the city and from Aberdeenshire. “How can there be a piece of such wild land in the city, sandwiched as it is between a struggling community and industry? Deer run across it! How crazy is that?” asked one first timer. Given the quality of the biodiversity - not at all!



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What is crazy is
one future for St

Fittick's Park that is the 'settled will of the council' that once created it. The park has been potentially rezoned from green belt to a development site for industrial use as part of what has been described by its proponents as the City's Energy Transition Zone, in the vicinity of the new South Harbour. For wind turbine manufacture, a wind turbine parts assembly area and decommissioning. When there are alternative brown field sites available at East Tullos and Altens – less than 1km away and with rail and road access – it is very alarming such a critical area to both people and wildlife is under such threat.



The rationale for the development itself is dubious, and why Aberdeen Harbour Board, Opportunity North East and ACC want to destroy this area is another story. But another future is possible, which we are fighting hard to achieve. By safeguarding what we have now and joining with people in Torry, we can make an alternative vision for St Fittick's. Outdoor teaching, engagement for families, vulnerable groups and children with the wildlife of the park act only as a fraction of the ways we want to utilise this space for people and wildlife, and to improve its biodiversity even more.

It has been less than ten years since the wetlands were created and St Fittick's already has the highest biodiversity in the city. Our ecologist considers St Fittick's Park already has the quality of a local nature reserve and even as an 'early career SSSI, and to lose it for speculative economic gain would be a catastrophic loss for the local people, and is a tragedy we had thought the city would have avoided.