



Contested expectations: Trump International Golf Links Scotland, polarised visions, and the making of the Menie Estate landscape as resource



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ABSTRACT

In initiating the development of a large-scale golf resort in Aberdeenshire, Trump International Golf Links Scotland made a relatively unknown site central to Scottish planning debates. A stretch of land along the North Sea coast north of Aberdeen became linked to new possible futures.

Part of the site developed consisted of moving sand dunes given environmental protection as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and from the onset a heated debate has concerned the transformability of these dunes. The land was simultaneously seen as perfect for a golf resort of a scale previously unseen in the UK and as sensitive land threatened by the development. Proponents asserted that future economic benefits would outweigh any environmental impact. Opponents in turn contested such expectations through asserting other variables to be counted, or questioning the possibility to control the dunes altogether. Hence, the resort's eventual relation to sand dunes, migrating pink-footed geese and fog along the coast became political arguments.

In this article I utilise this case to illustrate how the ways futures are expressed produces both political subjects and objects in the present. I argue that a process where social struggle is conducted as the production of future scenarios posits important opportunities for public engagement while also leading to new problems. This I shed light on by bringing together Callon's notion of performative theories with the literature on post-politics, offering a critique of expert-led environmental governance.

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'When I saw this piece of land I was overwhelmed by the imposing dunes and rugged Aberdeenshire coastline. I knew that this was the perfect site for Trump International, Scotland [...] I have never seen such an unspoilt and dramatic sea side landscape and the location makes it perfect for our development' (Donald Trump in *BBC News*, 2006a)

'Like probably 99.9% of the people who've become involved in this debate I knew nothing [about the development site], and I only live 5 miles from the estate. I drive past it on a regular basis and I didn't know it was there. And most people who've been up in arms about this couldn't point to it on a map before this started.' (Jim Gifford, Scottish Conservative Party, May 14 2009)

'Statements and their world are caught in a process of coevolution' (Callon, 2007:329)

1. Introduction: A landscape discovered

Perfect land, and unknown land. This article is an account of an Aberdeenshire landscape being discovered and re-defined, first by

a major real estate developer (Donald Trump-fronted Trump International Golf Club Scotland Limited, trading under the name Trump International Golf Links, Scotland), and consequently by a large number of activists and politicians (for an extended discussion, see [Ford, 2011](#)). It is an account of how various statements are caught in a process of co-evolution with the world ([Callon, 2007](#)), and what a struggle over describing and thus acting upon the world through expressing future scenarios can tell us about the possibilities and pitfalls for political action in environmental governance.

Since plans for a large-scale golf resort were initiated in 2006, the Menie Estate, a previously rather unknown site on the Scottish North Sea coast has been revalued as land potentially harbouring a golf resort which, according to proponents, 'could have the single biggest positive impact on the local economy since the discovery of oil' (*BBC News*, 2006b). At this site, 14 km north of Aberdeen, the resort 'Trump International Golf Links, Scotland' (TIGLS) is currently under construction. Two golf courses are planned, of which the first one opened in 2012, accompanied by a whisky from the GlenDronach distillery. Plans exist for a 450 room hotel, 186 golf villas, 600 holiday home units, 600 residential units, and 200 apartments together forming a resort village in a previously less-populated part of Aberdeenshire. Fully finished, the site would

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become home to a high-end golf resort 'of a scale not previously seen in the United Kingdom' (TIGLS, 2008). An economic survey commissioned by TIGLS expected the resort to generate over 4500 net construction jobs on a 1-year basis and over 1200 net jobs from on-going operations (Dunlop, 2008). The 2008 financial crisis has however delayed full completion of the resort (Carrell, 2011).

The developers saw a 'dramatic sea side' landscape as a resource to seize, but only if permitted to do so. As Tsing (2005: 50) has commented '[n]atural resources are not God given but must be wrested from previous economies and ecologies in violent extractions'. In the TIGLS case, a relatively unknown beach area was wrested out of its previous context to become the resource upon which a large-scale and high-end leisure resort would be built. In making this possible future visions played a pivotal role. Those wanting to utilise seemingly natural resources must also utilise a 'magical vision', 'which asks participants to see a landscape that doesn't exist, at least not yet.' (Tsing, 2005: 68).

Making this landscape into a resource has also been highly contested. Radically opposing visions for the Menie Estate, each claiming a particular future, are now in place. Proponents of the resort loaded the site with hopes for economic growth in Scotland and in Aberdeenshire. To paraphrase Trump (BBC News, 2006a) the landscape had to be framed as 'perfect' for the development, and the development had to be framed as beneficial for the region and nation. A landscape where a spectacular high-end golf resort was a welcome addition was what the developers asked decision-makers to see. Opponents saw another landscape, entirely. Their statements and scenarios made the site known as sensitive land lost to the resort development. Accounts of the development's potential economic impact have thus run parallel with accounts of its immense ecological impact, how the development transforms a unique site through the movement of 'biblical volumes of sand' (DPEA, 2008: 129).

The material transformation of the site has played a crucial role in this polarised 'visioneering' from the start. The northern end of the resort radically transforms the southern part of the Foveran Links Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI),¹ appropriating about one third of its area. Before development the most prominent feature of this SSSI was a large unvegetated sand sheet complex, over 600 m long and 400 m wide, which had remained active for most of the 20th century. This was seen as a valuable geomorphological interest due to the uniqueness of the scale and dynamism of the sand sheet, as well as due to the lack of human disturbance (Hansom, 2007). Together this provided a rare habitat for certain birds and plants. The scale of translocation required for the full resort would be one of the largest applied to a sand dune system in Scotland since a few large sites were used for airfields during the World War II (Dargie, 2008: 26), illustrating the immense environmental transformations entailed in reorganising rural settings for elite consumption (cf. McCarthy, 2008). Likened by Trump himself (quoted in Shoumatoff, 2008) to 'ripping down a landmark building in New York' the transformation of these dunes radically remade which kind of socio-ecological relations were seen as acceptable in planning and was sure to be a controversial decision.

¹ SSSI is a UK conservation designation which denotes protected areas. Areas can be protected both due to biological and/or geological interests at the site. Scottish SSSI's are protected by law from development, damage or neglect through lists of Operations Requiring Consent (ORC's) from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). This protection is however not absolute but rather an acknowledgement that the SSSI interests should be weighed against other factors. While SNH opposed golf resort development it was powerless to actually veto any planning decisions, even though many of the necessary procedures in transforming the mobile sand dunes at Foveran Links into a golf course – such as modification of natural features and application of fertilisers – were considered ORC's. Over 20 courses in Great Britain have significant SSSI dune habitats. However, all of these – apart from the Machrihanish Dunes, constructed in 2008 and Durness, 1988 – are older than 40 years (Sue Lawrence, personal communication). The vast majority of these courses were built well before the SSSI classification came into being in 1949.

Initially rejected by a regional planning body, the Infrastructure Services Committee, TIGLS was made possible only by the Scottish government rescaling the application into a national issue subject to a public inquiry. This form of decision-making steeped the process in a variety of factual statements as various experts (geologists, biologists, economists, etc.) 'gave evidence' at the inquiry. In proposing that the dunes were a resource to be utilised TIGLS backed their application with documents concerning the geomorphology of the site and Scottish coastlines as well as supporting e-mails from Scottish trade and industry. Environmental organisations produced their own accounts. Both politicians and residents sent in letters to the inquiry. Aberdeenshire Council expressed its support through its Director of Planning and Environmental Services who regarded the residential elements of the resort as 'an opportunity to secure an exemplar development here which would be a demonstration of best practice in relation to sustainable construction and sustainable living, in line with the Council's aspirations in this context' (Gore, 2008: 24). Respondents I interviewed in 2009 and 2010 referred time and again to statements and documents from the inquiry.

In this article the way proponents and opponents struggled to define the future implications of building a golf course on this particular spot is in focus. While the dunes have now been stabilised to allow the construction of the development's first course, fieldwork for this article was conducted before this course was constructed. Statements from this period offer an apt illustration of how the dunes and the landscape were seen in light of the resort project. While disagreement between proponents and opponents of the development is hardly surprising I argue that an analysis of statements reveal important insights concerning the rhetoric surrounding the making of resources and shed light on the ways future visions about how nature will act become arguments in debates over environmental transformations. An analysis of these statements allows me to bring together discussions from bodies of literature concerned with the role of researchers, future visions, politics, and public participation. Hence I mainly connect writings on the performativity of theory (Callon, 1998, 2007, 2009; Holm, 2007), and the critique of post-political governance (Cartney and Doyle, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010; Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010) as a problematical consensus-searching rational 'administration of social matters' (Žižek, 1999) based on the rule of experts. Both the literature on performativity of theory and the critique of post-political governance offer crucial insights into contemporary environmental governance. But both have also significant gaps which I argue partly can be addressed by bringing them into closer dialogue with each other. The literature on the performativity of theory neatly illustrates the many ways through which various groups struggle to remake the world through statements, models, and prognoses. There is however often a simplified notion of politics in much of this literature (cf. Taylor, 2011). The literature on post-politics, conversely, engages with political theory in depth and can hence address this gap. But this literature instead often ends by simply stating that various processes are post-political without fully exploring the dynamics of such processes (but see Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010). In this article I strive to take seriously the way people have become involved in the process in a way that is informed by the critical remarks provided in the literature on post-politics.

TIGLS hinged on enacting a world (cf. Callon, 1998, 2007) where sound environmental governance implies that environmental considerations are treated as weighable pros and cons, and where future economic impacts are treated as present economic reality even in the light of post-crisis uncertainties. The development was made possible through an 'ontological mutation' (Callon, 2007) that made the land legible to political discourses favouring the resort. By being talked about within specific discursive frames and by being

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