

Forestry Commission Scotland needs to account for its actions in our National Parks

Description

I have been away for a week but last Sunday Rob Edwards reported on the purchase of part of the Rothiemurchus estate by the FCS in the Sunday Herald – the full story can be found at <https://theferret.scot/1m-tax-sweetener-cairngorms-land-deal/> It raises some critical questions about the role of FCS in our National Parks.

How is it that FCS can “find” £7.2m to pay a landowner, Johnnie Grant, for purchase of part of Rothiemurchus which was fully protected and not under any threat (there is no indication that FCS had concerns about how the estate was being managed) but has no money to pay for campsites on its own extensive estate within Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park? FCS made it very clear in its response to the Your Park Consultation that while it fully supported camping byelaws it had NO resource to develop new campsites. Indeed, the LLTNP is now having to pay £345k to develop a new campsite on FCS land at Loch Chon <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/03/27/con-loch-chon-proposed-trossachs-west-camping-management-zone> For £7.2m FCS could have funded not just Loch Chon but another 20 or so campsites across its extensive landholdings around Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. To put it another way, for this sum FCS could have single-handedly addressed almost all the issues about lack of camping facilities in the LLTNP. However, rather than fund facilities that would benefit the people of Scotland FCS decided to buy Rothiemurchus, at the request of the landowner, and Scottish Ministers approved. What does this say about FCS’ and Scottish Ministers priorities?

How is it that FCS and Scottish Ministers believe it is acceptable to take such decisions in our National Parks without consulting the National Parks or Local Authority? FCS’ failure to follow its own internal processes for purchasing land (e.g the valuation of the land at Rothiemurchus) is bad enough, but its failure to consult the CNPA shows a complete disregard for National Parks. I am very critical of our National Parks but CNPA should have been consulted. If nothing else, our National Park Authorities were supposed to enable other public agencies to work in a joined up manner – hence the National Park Partnership Plans. What message does it give that FCS can, when it suits and with Ministerial approval, ignore the Park Authorities, whether its purchasing land or failing to develop visitor infrastructure on its estate?

How does the FCS’ and Ministers agreement to give Johnnie Grant first right to re-purchase Rothiemurchus, should it ever be put up for sale, fit with their oft-stated commitment to promote community ownership? It appears that should the local community on Speyside ever express an interest in purchasing lower Rothiemurchus, their rights to do so could be negated by the sale which

allow Johnnie Grant first option to re-purchase it at the market price (whatever that is). While this obviously could be subject to legal challenge, just what FCS and Ministers were thinking when they agreed a sale document that apparently gives the previous landowner greater rights than the local community, or anyone else for that matter, needs to be explained.

While its too late to change the purchase of Rothiemurchus, the implications of which will probably only become fully apparent over time, its not too late for the Scottish Government to learn from the experience. A starting point would be for the Scottish Government to make it clear that in future they wish the FCS:

- to stick to their procedures for the purchase of land, which are designed to show that such purchases are in the public interest, instead of abandoning all due diligence as they did at Rothiemurchus.
- to demonstrate that its resources are being used to benefit the people of Scotland rather than individual landowners
- to contribute the resources necessary to fund new campsites on its land in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, and
- to stop acting unilaterally in our National Parks and instead to start engaging and contributing as real partners (instead of demonstrating that the current National Park Partnership Plans are not worth the paper they are written on).

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Date Created

April 17, 2016

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