

Natural Retreats custodianship of the Cairngorm ski area and our public authorities

Description



Photo credit Ron Greer. Bulldozing ground lower Coire Cas before installation new ski tow and snow fencing

While I usually visit the Coire Cas carpark at least a couple of times a year to climb or ski tour it was years since I had taken a proper at the Cairngorm ski area. I was prompted to do so with Dave Morris two weeks ago by this photo taken by Ron Greer last year.

It was pure coincidence our visit happened just after Natural Retreats announced their decision not to replace the Day Lodge at Cairngorm with a new building <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/06/plans-cairngorm-dropped/> and that they were considering

other options, including a mountain bike track. I have since been doing a little digging of my own.



both out the slope.

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In the past the destruction evidenced by Ron's photo would never have been allowed. The construction of the funicular 1999-2001 pre-dated the creation of the Cairngorms National Park but strict construction requirements were put in place. For example, the use of machinery was restricted and the bases of some of the concrete stanchions which you can see in the right hand photo dug out by hand. I disagreed with the funicular – which has always be a white elephant – but at least at that time there were serious attempts to preserve the mountain and meet some of the criticisms of conservationists or indeed anyone who cared about the mountain. It appears that this is not longer the case, that Natural Retreats and its sub-contractors have been allowed to run amok and completely destroy the soils here.

While there have been attempts to restore the vegetation over most of the ground, there is already evidence of extensive problems.

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There are patches of ground where there has been no attempt to restore the vegetation that has been



Erosion, including gullying at the top of the new bulldozed track



Some of the attempts to restore vegetation have clearly failed

We have had a relatively dry year so far but its clear that with a period of heavy rain significant areas of the “restoration” work will wash away and the track, which points straight downhill and has no channels to collect the water flowing down it will start to develop deep erosion channels. This is not simply about standards of work that should be unacceptable in a National Park, its also about risks that the whole slope is washed away completely. I believe the public authorities, the Cairngorm National Park Authority, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Natural Heritage need to act on this and fast.

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The new track in Coire Cas is several hundred metres in length and the slopes to left and right of it h

After our visit I found out the new track has had no planning permission – **its an unlawful development in the heart of our National Park and to make matters even worse so far NO enforcement action has been taken against Natural Retreats.** Indeed I understand that significant other parts of the work undertaken by Natural Retreats had no planning permission and hope to cover this on Parkswatchscotland in due course.

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The new fencing is more concentrated lower down the hill

There is an aesthetic debate to be had on whether the new fencing looks better than the former chestnut fencing. The old fencing was well past its sell-by date and it may be the new horizontal plank design is more effective at trapping snow. What is indisputable though is that the new fencing does not make this a good place to walk and partially undermines previous attempts to create paths for general tourists through the ski area.

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Where now?

The destruction evidenced in these photos at the heart of our National Park should be of serious public concern and though harder to address than the rubbish that is littered everywhere, that would not prevent effective action if there was the will from our public authorities and politicians.

That Natural Retreats has breached planning requirements in the first two years of what is a lease which has something like 22 more years to run should not just be taken as an awful omen, it should trigger a review of the lease by HIE who own the land. I have already asked HIE for a copy of the lease and if this does not contain a require to adhere to planning conditions, one needs to be inserted immediately. If Natural Retreats failed to accept this I believe this would demonstrate they were unfit to operate any ski area in National Parks and that alone should be grounds to terminate the entire lease.

Breaching planning permission in the core of a National Park is unacceptable and the CNPA now needs to undertake a full audit of what elements of the works undertaken by Natural Retreats had planning permission and which did not and then take appropriate enforcement action. They also need to look at the quality of the restoration work in consultation with Scottish Natural Heritage who were involved in setting standards for the funicular development. I believe this should include commissioning an independent report on the damage that has been done here and how it can be repaired.

The damage caused by Natural Retreats means the ground and vegetation cover in Coire Cas will almost certainly never be able to be restored to its previous condition. To put it bluntly the land here has been trashed. I believe this is unacceptable which is why there need to be serious consequences for Natural Retreats. I very much doubt now they are fit to manage this area but the who care about this area, and the public authorities that are supposed to be its custodians, need to look forward and find solutions. I will argue in my next post on Cairngorm that the destruction caused by Natural Retreats provides an opportunity to develop a new vision for the ski area that would make it better for skiing, walking and wildlife.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Highlands Island Enterprise
4. hill tracks
5. natural retreats
6. planning
7. scottish natural heritage

Date Created

June 15, 2016

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