

Why has the destruction at Cairngorm happened?

Description

The creation of the new rope tow in Coire Cas, which created so much destruction at Cairngorm, required planning permission [Removal of Shieling Ski-Tow & replace with a modern rope-tow of similar length and profile](#). The Shieling tow replacement supporting images [document](#) is worth looking at as it gives a very clear picture of how this slope appeared before the works and what was planned: removal of the existing tow, smoothing out the existing bulldozed tow line and replacing the bridges over the Allt a Choire Chais with culverts. I don't think any of this was objectionable in principle and it had the potential both to improve the skiing and the appearance of this part of Coire Cas.

The problem with the planning application was twofold. First because the replacement sun-kid rope tow [2014_0251_DET-VISUAL_INFORMATION_-_TOW_LIFT-100105314](#) required a constant gradient the work required on the slope along the line of the lift was probably more extensive than was made clear in the supporting documents. Second, and related to this the Method Statement [2014_0251_DET-METHOD_STATEMENT-100105315](#) while clearly describing how the turf on the existing slope would be removed, stored and then replaced and referred to soil being removed, stored and replaced it did not say how much or where it would be put.

I am not sure the planner appreciated just how much soil and boulders would be shifted



Shifting and storage of soil and boulders was not mentioned in the Method Statement – a huge pile can be seen centre background outwith the area granted planning permission

Photo Credit Ron Greer



Photo credit Alan Bratley



The Method Statement did not say what would happen to boulders that impacted on the “reprofiling” of the slope Photo credit Alan Bratney

The Planning Application was from Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, which is run by Natural Retreats, and it was Natural Retreats who were responsible for the day to day monitoring of the works. However, the Method Statement made it clear that the overall plan was authorised by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and indeed that HIE (rather than Natural Retreats) was to appoint the contractors. It appears therefore that HIE as well as Natural Retreats are responsible for everything that has gone wrong. This is important because HIE is a very powerful body in the Highlands with a proven history of driving through its own agenda for the ski area, including the funicular white elephant. I would not underestimate how difficult it would be for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to take on HIE without political backing.

Having said that, I believe there have been a number of clear breaches of the planning permission granted for the Shieling Ski Tow replacement for which the CNPA needs to hold both HIE and Natural Retreats to account. These include:

The new bulldozed track



There was no reference to a new bulldozed track in the planning application – a clear breach of planning requirements
George Paton

Photo Credit

Work undertaken outwith the area granted planned permission



Working taking place on the bank below the shieling ski tow – the planning permission did not cover this area
credit George Paton

Photo



A hole excavated by a digger outwith the area granted planning permission – it appears the contractors were short of vegetation (implying they had not stored turf in the manner specified) and tried to address this failure by taking vegetation from elsewhere. There is no mention of this in the Method Statement and it is also clearly outwith the planning permission granted

Photo Credit
Alan Bratney

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The contractor has failed to finish off the new culvert let alone in the manner specified



Photo Nick Kempe

And there is the question of whether this pit was covered by the planning permission?



Pit into which soil, peat and boulders was later dumped Photo Credit Alan Bratney

What needs to happen about the breaches in planning permission at Cairngorm?

There are some lessons here for planning authorities and the CNPA in particular and these are that it is not wise to trust applicants for any planning permission to monitor their own work. I believe the photos demonstrate neither HIE nor Natural Retreats can be trusted – if they disagree with this I would be happy for them to justify what they have allowed to happen on Parkswatchscotland. While I understand because of resource issues its impossible for planning authorities to monitor every application, Cairngorm is not just anywhere but crucial to the well-being of the National Park. Independent monitoring by the CNPA as planning authority should have taken place throughout the works. This would have limited the breaches of the planning permission granted. The CNPA and Highland Council (which is responsible for more minor planning applications) should ensure this is in place for any future planning applications involving IE and Natural Retreats.

The CNPA now need to take firm action to enforce the requirements of the planning permission it granted otherwise its going to lose all credibility. I suspect that HIE will resist this and unless they offer

a full and public apology for what has happened and take a lead in re-instating the bulldozed track and repairing the other damage, I believe they are no longer fit to own the ski area.

The solution to these problems and to realising the vision I have outlined for Cairngorm is to transfer the ownership of the Cairngorm back to Forestry Commission Scotland while leaving liability for the funicular and for re-instatement of any of the other parts of the ski development that might eventually be removed with HIE. I will cover how this might happen and the quality of the restoration work undertaken at the shieling in due course.

Author's note

I am very grateful to all the people who provided parkswatchscotland with photos following my first post on the destruction at Cairngorm and for allowing me to include them in this post but I should hardly need to point out that the views expressed above are purely my own.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. natural retreats
4. planning

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