

The Cairngorms National Park Authority Board Meeting today

Description

It feels a little strange to be writing about the CNPA Board Meeting today

<http://cairngorms.co.uk/meeting/board-2016-06-24> – a small issue in the scheme of things – when Britain has voted to leave the EU but Scotland has voted the other way. I believe the political and economic uncertainty this has already caused creates opportunities as well as risks.

An example that affects our National Parks is our wildlife legislation. In my email inbox this morning was a message from Friends of the Earth which started “many of our environmental and nature protections are now at risk”. FoE along with RSPB have for a long time put much of their effort as regards nature conservation into trying to increase the land covered by the EU designations of Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area. I remember when I was on the Board of SNH the RSPB pushing for more Special Protection Areas, the EU designation to protect birds, to save Hen Harriers. I observed then that because the criteria for SPAs was that the land to be protected had to contain a certain percentage of a bird species that, having drawn a line on a map around hen harrier nests, all the landowners had to do was to magic away a couple of the hen harrier and the criteria for the SPA were not met. In my view this actually resulted in increased persecution! This was because SPAs did not tackle the real issues. The point is that whatever you think about the EU, we have the ability to protect our hen harrier in Scotland much better than we do at present. I am not claiming the international dimension to wildlife protection is not important – it clearly is for migrating birds – but there are plenty of ways the Scottish Government and organisations like our National Parks could protect our hen harriers here and now.

It is disappointing therefore to find there is nothing on the CNPA Board meeting agenda about wildlife persecution in the National Park <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/03/25/stop-raptor-persecution-cairngorms-national-park/> or any opportunity for the Board to consider what it could do about this. One of the positive differences between the CNPA and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority is that there is far more focus on conservation and wildlife in the Cairngorms. The issue is that despite lots of positive wildlife initiatives, the really major challenges such as the lack of hen harriers in the National Park are simply avoided – in public at least. The papers for the Board Meeting today provide an illustration of the challenges that are being avoided and which I believe our National Parks were set up in part to address.

The CNPA has a number of key performance indicators. For wildlife this is the number of capercaillie in the National Park and one of the aims is to increase the number of males counted at Leks from 175 in 2014 to 180 in 2018. Reporting figures are not available so far for this year. Now while you could question the lack of ambition in the indicator I don't think this is the real issue. We know enough to

say first that the reasons that account for the perilous status of capercaillie in Scotland are complex and second that there are some organisations with very committed staff on the ground (Forestry Commission Scotland and RSPB) who are trying all they can to manage their land in a way that helps capercaillie. The capercaillie Performance Indicator suits them because it helps justify their efforts and I suspect to secure funding for their work. Meantime, the moorland in the Park which should be supporting large numbers of hen harrier is devoid of them. I can't helping thinking that the number of successful pairs of hen harrier breeding in the National Park would be a far better performance indicator which would encourage the CNPA Board to consider how it could achieve change rather than being able to sit back and leave this to others.

Another example of this is the paper on Land Management Training. The National Park runs a number of subsidised training events for farmers and estates staff which are about improving skills and includes events on such things as montane scrub restoration, which clearly are related to the fundamental purpose of the National Park, but also more general skills such as chainsaw and ATV handling. One wonders if whoever on the Invermark estate <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/07/invermark-estate-management-raptor-persecution-angus-glens/chopped-down-the-tree-where-sea-eagles-nested-had-been-on-a-National-Park-sponsored-chainsaw-course-?> The paper says the training is all about assisting the National Park to achieve its objectives (which I applaud) but then gives no consideration of what should happen where estates and farmers appear not to be working to meet those objectives. In the jargon there is nothing in the paper about "cross compliance".

The biggest issue which has been avoided in the papers for the Board Meeting is the status of designated conservation features in the Park. The CNPA target is to increase the number of these in favourable or recovering condition from 79% in 2014 to 90% in 2018. In January 2016 this had gone up by just 2% to 81% which suggests its unlikely the target will be met. Yet there is nothing in the Board Report to highlight this and no analysis given of what is going on. Instead there are updates on a number of conservation initiatives. These of course are commendable but the real issue is why is it that in Scotland, even in our National Parks fourteen years after their creation, so many conservation sites are still not in favourable condition. The answer of course lies in how the land is being managed but that is an issue which it appears either the Board is not allowed to discuss or discussions happen in private.

The Board Papers do suggest certain opportunities in the papers though. An example is that one of the CNPA targets is to increase planting of native woodland by 5000 hectares and this also appears behind schedule (1500 hectares planted 2013-15) – so why not do something visionary and include the ski area in this? <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/17/ring-ouzels-new-vision-cairngorm-ski-area/>.

The other agenda item which I thought was of particular interest were the papers on the Glenmore

consultation (where I have been involved representing the Scottish Campaign for National Parks)

<http://cairngorms.co.uk/resource/docs/boardpapers/24062016/160624CNPABdPaper4Cairngorm&Glenmore>

And

<http://cairngorms.co.uk/resource/docs/boardpapers/24062016/160624CNPABdPaper4Annex1C&GConsultation>

There is no revised strategy as yet but there are some indications of the direction of travel, both positive and negative. On the positive side there is a reference to all the main partners agreeing there needs to be integrated management in Glenmore and Cairngorm and it appears there are plans afoot to integrate the Ranger Service at Cairngorm, which is operated through HIE, with that at Glenmore, operated by FCS. The major issue of course is whether the land will be managed in an integrated manner, from glen to summit, and unfortunately there is information in the papers to suggest this has a long way to go. So “HIE are finalising their management plan” and “Natural Retreats are continuing to develop their master plan”. This is almost certainly code for saying that the CNPA staff do not know what either HIE or Natural Retreats are planning let alone whether this will be compatible with the proposed strategy. How can different land managers preparing their own plans in isolation be compatible with the vision of integrated land management? That is one of the major questions CNPA Board Members should be asking today.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. HIE
4. LLTNPA
5. natural retreats
6. Scottish Government
7. wildlife persecution

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