

Why have the standards of work at Cairngorm fallen so far?

Description

I was never in favour of the funicular railway, a white elephant that has drained resources about the ski area, but great care was taken in its construction as is shown by the photo below.



Funicular construction – Photo credit George Paton

The area where earth works could take place was clearly demarcated and many of the bases for the stanchions were dug out by hand to avoid damage to vegetation from heavy machinery. A similar provision was included in Para 1.3 of the Method Statement for the Shieling ski tow [2014_0251_DET-METHOD_STATEMENT-100105315](#) “site cordon for access will be established to control vehicle movement and prevent damage to vegetation.” This however does not seem to have happened as evidenced by the photos below, taken below by two separate witnesses, which shows

there was no demarcation of the site granted planning permission.



Photo Credit Ron Greer



No evidence of site boundaries Photo Credit George Paton

The result was that the diggers used to regrade the former bulldozed track that formed the old ski tow crossed out of the area granted planning permission. One of the things they did was cut back the bank below the bottom of the piste. This was not related to the planning permission at all – it seems that Natural Retreats just took advantage of the diggers being present to do a bit of “piste improvement” below the area of the rope tow. The diggers also however dug out vegetation from outwith the area granted planning permission in order to “restore” the re-alignment of the slope which had been granted planning permission. Clearly, the requirement in the original planning permission that all the vegetation removed from the piste was stored and then re-used to cover it again had not been observed otherwise there would have been no need to do this.



Digger operating outwith area granted planning permission – the lack of boundary markings made it easy for them to do this



Hole created by ripping out vegetation outwith area granted planning permission
Photo Credit George Paton

One wonders if the operators of the diggers were even informed by Natural Retreats about the site boundary or what work had been granted planning permission. I suspect not. The people who operate these machines are often highly skilled but they will only do what they are told to do (and are paid for). In the absence of any site boundary markers, they can hardly be held responsible for what happened. Instead responsibility lies with Natural Retreats, who were responsible for appointing and managing the contractors, HIE who funded the work and the CNPA as the planning authority.

These photos demonstrate the importance of the people who draw up and agree specifications for works in our mountain areas monitoring them to see they are enforced – without this the specifications are not worth the paper they are written on. The monitoring arrangements for the Sheiling Ski tow work were clearly grossly inadequate. While it appears the CNPA did eventually visit when alerted to the breaches in planning permission and after the damage was done we don't know if HIE visited at all.

While I know enough about Cairngorm to know that standards have gone up and down over the years – the lift supports for the now defunct Coire na Ciste chairlift were helicoptered in to restrict damage to ground vegetation – what we now appear to be witnessing is an unprecedented drop in standards so that almost anything now appears acceptable. Responsibility for allowing this to happen lies with our public authorities. My suspicion is that CNPA took their eye off the ball because of the lack of public objections to the planning application for the replacement ski tow. If lots of people had objected to that application they would have appreciated they were under public scrutiny and I suspect would have devoted the resources necessary to ensure this development was carried out as planned. Meantime, HIE, because of the parlous finances of the ski area, had no incentive to do anything which might increase costs. The consequence of these failures has been the disgraceful destruction that has taken place at and around the Shieling ski tow.

The fall in standards in Cairngorm goes far wider than the shieling planning applications as previous posts on parkswatch have demonstrated. As further evidence, parkswatch was sent some photos taken a couple of weeks ago from around the Fiacail Poma loading area. The background to these photos is that the wooden loading platform at the Poma was very rotten and was removed last Autumn. A new and smaller wooden loading platform was constructed this Spring along with a new Lifties Hut. This did not require planning permission and responsibility for the standards of the work therefore lies with Natural Retreats and HIE as the manager of their lease.

[Why not clear and tidy up as you go?](#)



Photo Credit Alan Bratney



Photo Credit Alan Bratney

watermark

If leaving rubbish is just carelessness, allowing old pieces of timber to remain embedded in the peat is

clear proof of negligence



Detritus from the old Fiacail poma embedded in peat near the start of the northern corries path –
Photo Credit Alan Bratney

Natural Retreats has had months to clear this up. They clearly cannot be trusted and HIE as the grantor of the lease should be supervising everything they do. HIE have now acknowledged my request for a copy of their lease with Natural Retreats under FOI. It will be interesting to see if its released and if so whether it contains any provision for financial penalties for failures in management and indeed if negligent care of the ski area by Natural Retreats ultimately gives HIE the right to terminate their contract.

What needs to happen now?

At present the Cairngorms National Park Authority only has restricted planning powers – a power to call in applications made to the Local Authorities that make up the Cairngorms area. They have recently been lobbying to have all the planning powers that still lie with local authorities transferred to them. On the evidence of Cairngorm they have a lot to do to prove they are fit to assume these

functions. The destruction caused by the Sheiling tow provides quite a contrast to the way the funicular was constructed prior to the creation of the National Park. Since then standards should have gone up, not down. I would suggest any decision on the transfer of planning powers should be put on hold by Scottish Ministers until the CNPA shows it is capable of using its enforcement powers to restore the destruction that has taken place at Cairngorm and show that it can do at least as well as Highland Council once did.

HIE as owner of the area, funder of this work and the body responsible for the lease with Natural Retreats needs to start taking pro-active steps to address the destruction and prevent this happening in future. This should include a review of the lease with Natural Retreats. My own view is if they fail to do this they will have demonstrated themselves as being unfit to continue their custodianship of the ski area.

The public authorities involved in the ski area (CNPA, HIE, SNH, SEPA) need to ensure an independent ecological report is commissioned (it can be paid for by Natural Retreats but they should have no part in managing whoever was appointed) to look at the damage that has been done at Cairngorm and how it might be restored.

Linked to this Scottish Ministers and the CNPA should signal that its time to look at a new vision for the ski area <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/17/ring-ouzel-new-vision-cairngorm-ski-area/> and get all stakeholders together to produce this and a practical plan for how it could be realised.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. H
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4. natural retreats
5. planning
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