

The destruction at Cairngorm – what should CNPA and HIE now do?

Description

I am delighted that both Keith Bryers from HIE – see previous post – has confirmed that at least some of the destruction undertaken by Natural Retreats required planning permission and that they now expect two retrospective planning applications to be made to the Cairngorm National Park Authority, one for the bulldozed track and the other for the destruction of the bank below the shieling ski tow.

The need for planning permission has also been confirmed by the Cairngorms National Park Authority in an email to Ron Greer, although they are less specific about which works were undertaken outwith the scope of the planning permission granted.

Dear Mr Greer

Thank you for your email and photographs of various construction works in the vicinity of the Sheiling Tow, Coire Cas, Cairngorm. Your photographs show various stages of development between late 2015 and earlier this year.

The CNPA issued planning permission for the replacement of the Shieling Tow and works began in late 2015 and continued after the end of the skiing season in 2016. The reinstatement and restoration works for the site are ongoing with phases of reseeded of vegetation currently underway and planned for the future. The CNPA has been monitoring the development since last year and will continue to do so. The CNPA has also been in discussion with Natural Retreats since last year over the implementation of the planning permission and the restoration of the site. Where works have taken place that the CNPA considers would require a different planning permission in order to be authorised, we expect retrospective planning permission to be applied for.

Kind regards

*Gavin Miles
Head of Planning
Cairngorms National Park Authority*

While the email is not specific, there is evidence that more than two unauthorised works have been undertaken by Natural Retreats at Cairngorm. If CNPA are now looking at all the works undertaken by Natural Retreats that should have had planning permission that would be a positive thing. Its another indication that the situation is worse than HIE has so far admitted. I believe this reinforces the need

(see <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/29/standards-work-cairngorm-fallen-far/>) for the public authorities at Cairngorm to ensure an independent report is commissioned into the scope of the damage caused by Natural Retreats and the works undertaken outwith planning permission.

In terms of any retrospective applications (I have checked again today and so far there is nothing on the CNPA website about this), I believe HIE in their email have provided NO case for approving the creation of a new track at the Shieling Ski Tow. Access tracks to installations such as ski lifts would normally be discussed and agreed as part of the specification for their development prior to planning permission being applied for. The fact that it wasn't suggests there was no need for it – either that, or Natural Retreats are so incompetent that their lease should be terminated. The most likely reason I can see for the creation of the track is that so much vegetation had been destroyed by the contractors – contrary to the requirements of the planning permission that it be stored and re-used – that they did not have enough left to resurface the ski slope. A shortfall in vegetation would also explain the holes which were excavated by digger from outwith the area granted planning permission. So, as to alternative to finding yet more vegetation, what better solution than a new bulldozed track (which of course has an unvegetated surface), hope no-one notices but, if they do, then invent a reason to justify it. It seems very strange, if this track was justified and its omission a genuine mistake, that Natural Retreats did not submit a planning application months ago. The CNPA should therefore I believe reject any retrospective planning application and use its enforcement powers to ensure the area is properly restored. If CNPA does not do this, a precedent will have been set for the whole of Cairngorm and other ski areas within the National Park. Indeed, we could end up with bulldozed tracks alongside every ski lift in Scotland.

HIE also claims in the email that the bank below the ski tow was destroyed because the area around the lower shieling lift needed to be raised. Again, any competent surveyor/designer should have identified this as a requirement before an application for planning permission was submitted. Had this been done, there would have been no need to bury the “excess” “spoil” which appears to have come from the shieling tow slope (and is incidentally another example of the destruction that does not appear to have been covered by the planning application which was approved).



Photo credit Alan Bratney

Instead the spoil could have been re-used to raise the ground for the lift.

The evidence suggests that the bank was destroyed simply because it was the easy option. Cairngorm has been treated like a derelict building site in central Scotland with the whole landscape bulldozed without any regard to its value. The question is do CNPA and HIE believe this is acceptable and if not what are they going to do to remedy the damage and make sure such destruction will never ever be allowed in future?

It may now however be impossible for CNPA to require the bank to be restored to how it was originally – too much material has been removed. This is another good reason why the CNPA and other public authorities should require Natural Retreats to pay for an independent report. Such a report could, as well as surveying the damage, look at the options for restoration, including the bank below the shieling ski tow. There is an obvious opportunity here to require planting of montane scrub species – by someone qualified to do so as part of a wider vision for the Cairngorm ski area <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/17/ring-ouzels-new-vision-cairngorm-ski-area/> Indeed, since there isn't any "spare" vegetation to restore the track, rather than re-seeding it with grasses, this seems a good opportunity to plant more montane scrub species along the fenceline. In other words the CNPA and other public authorities could use the terrible failings at Cairngorms as an opportunity to

start realising a new vision.

Category

1. Cairngorms

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2. HIE
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