

Raptor persecution in the Cairngorms National Park and the draft Cairngorm Partnership Plan

Description

A week ago the National Trust for Scotland announced that four hen harrier chicks had fledged on their Mar Lodge estate, in the central Cairngorms. Raptor Persecution Scotland commented in their blog last week time that the chances of the young harriers surviving were extremely low given the history of raptor persecution in the Cairngorms National Park. Just a week later the truth of this comment was demonstrated by the [announcement](#) that an illegal trap had been discovered on the neighbouring Invercauld Estate along with evidence that a further 8 illegal traps that had been removed before the police were able to start their investigation. While the trap that was found contained a common gull, it could just as well have caught a hen harrier – proof of Raptor Persecution Scotland’s comment that if the young harriers moved east they were likely done for.

It was good to see another quick response from the Cairngorms National Park Authority Chief Executive, Grant Moir, <http://cairngorms.co.uk/illegal-trap-use-statement-from-ceo/> unequivocally condemning the use of the trap. His request for a meeting with the Head Trustee and Sporting Partner at Invercauld however, though I am sure well intentioned, simply illustrates the weakness of National Parks. A strong National Park would have summoned the estate and all the trustees to explain themselves or risk losing their right to hunt (which as the blog has pointed out they could control through byelaws). Instead, the CNPA has not even named the Head Trustee and Sporting Partner. Do the CNPA not know who the people are? Or are they allowing the people ultimately responsible for management of the estate to hide their identity? The Farquharson family, who control the Invercauld Estate, hide behind a trust structure that protects their assets but why should the National Park perpetuate this? What about some openness?

Moreover, instead of calling on other public authorities to contribute resources for enforcement (resources that are unlikely to materialise under austerity), why does not the CNPA simply use the powers it already has to license all hunting in the National Park and suspend or remove that license whenever evidence of wildlife crime such as this occurs as previously suggested on this blog <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/03/25/stop-raptor-persecution-cairngorms-national-park/>? The deterrent effect of this would I believe be sufficient to solve the problem of wildlife persecution overnight and would NOT require other public authorities to contribute further resources.

Unfortunately, the CNPA in trying to work in partnership with landowners appears to have got far too close to them. The problem is illustrated by the CNPA’s new Partnership Plan, which is currently out for consultation, and which set the future direction of the National Park over the next five years. It includes nine issues reports, the second of which is on Deer and Moorland Management

[160621DeerMoorlandManagementFINAL1-1](#) (there is no conservation issues report as such despite the Park's primary objective being conservation).

On page 5 of this report CNPA quotes from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, treating them apparently as an authoritative source:

Red grouse productivity on moorland managed for grouse has been increased in through the a) reduction in the burden of ticks, particularly on young grouse, by as 'tick mops' and b) control of strongylosis through use of medicated grit. The louping ill, a viral disease transmitted between host animals by ticks, causes reduced chick survival, with up to 80% of infected chicks dying. As a consequence, chick rates average 50% lower on moors with louping ill (GWCT).

No mention here of the impact of raptor persecution on grouse numbers. It was the very same GWCT which on Friday issued a press release on behalf of the Invercauld estate (see here) first denying the crime and then alleging that if the illegal traps had been set this must have been done by people trying to discredit the grouse shooting industry. Why is the CNPA giving the GWCT credence by quoting them uncritically?

While later in the Deer and Moorland Management Issues Report the CNPA does question some of the statements of the grouse lobby, the report contains is no fundamental questioning of the impact of current grouse moor management on wildlife or whether this is compatible with the conservation objective of the National Park. It is worth stating loudly and clearly that in the case of conflict and the CNPA does acknowledge some of the conflict the Scottish Parliament intended the conservation objective to override all the other objectives and this is enshrined in law in the National Parks Act. This should be the basis of the Partnership Plan.

Instead of giving a firm lead based on its legal obligations, however, at the end of the Issues Report 2 on Deer and Moorland Management the CNPA asks two 2 questions, the first on deer numbers (which I will cover in another post) and the second on grouse moor management:

How can management for grouse be better integrated with wider habitat and species enhancement objectives such as woodland expansion, peatland restoration and raptor conservation?

I believe this is the wrong question. The right question, based on the CNPA's founding legislation, would be to ask HOW can grouse moor management be made compatible with the National Park's conservation objectives? The answer to both that and the Park's own question is *not* by voluntary means. The CNPA has been trying to prevent raptor persecution by persuasion for over ten years without any significant success. It is time to admit defeat and the interests of grouse moor managers are such that the system will never change voluntarily.

It is the CNPA's reliance on voluntary means, which its staff must know by now will not work, which I believe accounts for the Issues Report proposing the following targets/direction of travel for the new Partnership Plan:

Improve the integration of grouse moor and sporting deer management with wildlife habitat and species diversity;
Improve raptor population conservation;

The first is totally wrong as well as being so vague as to be meaningless. What the National Park's overriding conservation objective should mean is that the economic and cultural interests of shooting estates should not be at the expense of wildlife or habitats. I would suggest the following should flow from this as a start:

- All hunting in the CNPA should be licensed. I appreciate there is now a campaign to license all gamebird hunting nationally but there is nothing to stop the CNPA starting a consultation on new hunting bye-laws now which should be broader than just gamebirds and include hunting of mammals from deer to mountain hares.
- The use of ALL traps should be banned within the National Park except in limited cases under license. The CNPA should not be prioritising one species over another in terms of conservation objectives (in contrast to grouse moor management priorities grouse over everything from mountain hares to stoats to golden eagles) and there is no general justification for trapping in our National Parks. I would suggest the only trapping that could be justified in the National Park would be for introduced species such as mink.

The second *target*, to *improve raptor population conservation* as phrased does not even mean the CNPA is committed to increase numbers of raptors in the National Park. To give this bite the CNPA should:

- Consult with RSPB and the raptor study groups and come up with a (conservative estimate) for the minimum number of nesting pairs of each species of raptor the National Park could be expected to support at present (given current state of habitats without any wildlife persecution). For example, 30 pairs of hen harrier, 20 pairs of golden eagle etc. The target should then be to reach this number before the end of the Partnership Plan. This should not be difficult to achieve. Raptor populations would expand quickly if they were not illegally killed and their primary food sources apart from red grouse, such as mountain hare, ceased to be systematically cleared from the moors.
- Make a commitment to satellite tag all species of raptors where persecution has had a serious impact on populations. The National Park used to be involved in a satellite tagging project and its very sad that this now depends on the efforts of others. According to the reports on the young NTS hen harriers only one of the four is to be tagged. Tagging appears the best deterrent against persecution because it provides evidence of where birds were last seen alive (and this evidence could play an important role in the CNPA being able to revoke hunting licenses because of illegal persecution). Every reason then for our National Parks to fund satellite tagging.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. grouse moors
4. hunting
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