

The continued destruction and lack of care at Cairngorm

Description



An illustration of the extensive “works” at Coire Cas Cairngorm taken mid-July
credit George Paton

Photo

It is good to be able to report that following coverage on Parkswatch, Natural Retreats has been making some effort to clear up Cairngorm. Indeed it has created a new section on the Cairngorm Mountain website to try and convince the wider world that they are doing a good job <http://www.cairngormmountain.org/category/behind-the-scenes/>. Last Sunday I walked around the lower Coire Cas area and there is plenty of evidence to show that what they have done leaves a lot to

be desired and the fundamental problems remain.



Much of the rubbish by the start of the Car Park T-bar and Coire Cas path, featured on parkswatch, has been removed but if you look carefully you can see its a job half done – plenty of scrap wood middle left.



Bits of old piping left in ground that has been re-seeded (bright green) on the bank where work was done without planning permission.

You don't have to walk far to find plenty of evidence of lack of care. Since Natural retreats has conducted such extensive re-landscaping, all apparently with the tacit agreement of Highlands and Island Enterprise but outside the area granted planning permission, why not take the opportunity to clear it up? Why does not the Cairngorms National Park Authority, as part of its enforcement powers, require Natural Retreats and HIE to clear up all the mess in the areas where work took place outwith planning permission? Planning staff have apparently walked around the area – have they not seen what is in these photos or is someone preventing them from taking action?



This section of the old pipe is even more obvious but is just outside the “re-landscaped” area



Rubbish left by funicular stanchions on the edge of the reprofiled shieling poma slope that was granted planning permission

Compare the spin from Natural Retreats on their restoration work, and the photos on their website, with the evidence posted:

The summer season upon us, our mountain teams are well and truly out in full force, rejuvenating and preparing the ground for another year of CairnGorm adventures. From our selection of images below [i.e on their website], you can see that full-scale landscaping is underway, with our teams paying close attention to reseeding the grassy areas, to encourage wildlife and reinject some colour back into the landscape after the snow-laden winter season. (22nd July)



When Natural Retreats stated they had completed restoration of the car park T bar uplift track – which did not require planning permission – they made no mention of the upper part of the tow where the cable follows the other side of the fence. The restoration work here is far from impressive but it appears vehicles are using this to access the area of land in the far right lower middle section of the first photo – for a purpose that I have not yet established. Just what have Natural Retreats and HIE been up to here?



The “re-instated” ditch at the top of the Car Park t-bar – a very similar photo appears on the Natural Retreats website and which they claim as evidence of re-instatement

Now, I am not an expert on restoration work but I do not understand what good practice this photo is supposed to demonstrate? Boulders that were once embedded or beneath vegetation are now lying loose above it and some no doubt will soon roll downhill while the drainage has been totally altered with lots of “pockets” for water to accumulate.



One of two unfinished culvert on the edge of the Sheiling Poma ski slope – there are three culverts in all, only two of which are referred to in the planning application

Yes, Natural Retreats has been re-seeding but not areas which were previously grassy as it claimed in the quote above. A planning condition for the sheiling poma was that Natural Retreats removed all the vegetation, stored it and then replaced it. The extensive re-seeding has been required because of their failure to comply with planning conditions and the bright green colour highly artificial, the result of the use of the blue/grey fertiliser you can see in the foreground. There was nothing about widespread re-seeding in this way in the planning permission but it is now needed because of their complete failure to observe planning conditions. My belief is that the Cairngorms National Park Authority should as part of enforcement require Natural Retreats to pay for montane scrub planting on the slopes in the background (which are not part of the piste) as a compensatory measure.

Another quote

“Another week at CairnGorm Mountain brings another list of improvements and nurturing of our beautiful mountain terrain. Much of our CPT uptrack has been reinstated after maintenance works, alongside some brilliant new fencing being laid along the West Wall Poma and West Wall Uptrack. In the Cas Gantry area, there’s been a focus on re-profiling the old bulldozed banks that hail from the 60’s ad 70’s, with great success.” (26th July)



The new Cas Gantry, replaced last year – planning permission was waived because it was supposed to be an emergency (quite foreseeable because it had not been maintained) and works were supposed to be de minimis – ie so little that planning permission was not required.

Most of the spoil under the gantry previously featured on parkswatch is still there – you can judge for yourself whether this is “de minimis”. Is the spoil heap part of the “great success” that Natural Retreats claims to have had in “reprofiling” the old bulldozed tracks.



The track between the Coire Cas Gantry and the pumphouse at the bottom of the zig-zags.



The track as it approaches the gantry with more reprofiled ground. There appears to have been no attempt to save existing vegetation.

The widening of the track at the bottom of the zig zags to the gantry was also allowed without planning permission on a “de minimis” basis. It is likely to increase the speed of skiers just as they approach the top of the Car Park t-bar where other skiers are dismounting increasing the risk of accidents. The rationale in skiing terms for broadening this piece of track was highly questionable and is likely to increase the number of accidents. It raises more questions about Natural Retreats and HIE’s fitness to manage the ski area. As for Natural Retreats claims that the restoration has been a great success, again you can judge for yourself – at best I think one could say its far too early to tell.

What are the solutions to this mess?

- First, Scottish Ministers should now start considering a transfer of ownership of the land at Cairngorm back to Forestry Commission Scotland. HIE is not just the landowner, it has funded most of these works (the replacement of the Gantry and the Sheiling Poma). It therefore bears as much responsibility as Natural Retreats for the mess and indeed is responsible for the historic

mess at Cairngorm which preceded the lease with Natural Retreats. There is ample evidence now that it is not fit to own the land here (and I hope to produce more evidence for this in the weeks to come) and Scottish Ministers should act accordingly.

- Second, HIE and Natural Retreats should pay for an independent ecological survey to document the extent of the destruction and set out options for restoration of the damaged areas (both the piste areas and the land outside these). I would like to see the land outside the pistes, including the banks, becoming part of a montane scrub project as a compensatory measure for the damage that has been done.
- Third, there should be no development allowed at Cairngorm, even on a de minimis basis, without submission of detailed plans which spell out the impact of works on the land and how this will be managed. This means that both Highland Council and the Cairngorm National Park Authority should stop waiving the need for planning permission on the grounds that works are “de minimis”. For works that do not formally require planning permission, all that is needed is that under the forthcoming Glenmore and Cairngorm Plan there is a formal agreement about standards for all work at Cairngorm and the process by which developments should be agreed.

Solving the mess at Cairngorm is not difficult, it would just take “political” will. My next post will cover more about the formal breaches of planning permission at Cairngorm and why the CNPA has so far failed to use its enforcement powers.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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Date Created

August 4, 2016

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