The inflammatory post from Rothiemurchus and camping rights

Description

I was in Glen Lyon yesterday, enjoying the weather window in the earlier part of the day, to run over a few hills but must confess to thinking a few times about my last post. I was worried if I had got the wording right so it was re-assuring to return and see there has been a mini-twitter flurry based on Bob Reidâ??s tweet that it had provided a sense of perspective â?? thanks Bob!

I had had a few more thoughts though â?? not about ecology â?? but about why the Rothiemurchus post should be seen as an incitement to undermine access rights.

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Our access legislation includes rights to undertake an number of activities on land where access rights apply â?? subject to the law and behaving responsibly. This includes the rights to camp, walk, bike, horse ride and to light fires. All these activities are distinct but the Rothiemurchus post was about linking camping to fire lighting â?? so it was the â??selfishâ?• campers who had behaved in a â??shockingly irresponsibleâ?• way and then â??scarperedâ?•. The reader is left with the impression that it is the camping, not the fire lighting, which is the problem and the predictable result is there are calls to ban camping.

A more accurate way to have described the people whose actions led to the destruction of the Granny pine could have been to call them â??fire lightersâ?•. That sounds very stilted! Part of the problem is that English, that most flexible of languages, does not have an extensive vocabulary to describe the motivations and behaviours of people who light fires. I can think of â??arsonistâ?• at one extreme. The people who burned the Granny pine were not, I think, arsonists â?? maybe â??fire loutsâ?• would get across the idea they were acting at the very irresponsible behaviour end of the spectrum. But what word do we use for the people who light fires responsibly in places safe to do so?

While we need to develop a vocabulary to describe the lighting of fires under access rights, the lack of one does not excuse Rothiemurchus mis-describing irresponsible fire lighters as irresponsible campers. They could have described the people as â??shockingly irresponsibleâ?• visitors but that would be to attack the goose that lays the golden egg. So ignore the fact that fires can be lit by day visitors (anyone from general tourist to people fishing) and just use this as an opportunity to attack campers. Unfortunately, the way the Scottish Outdoor Access Code has been written at present makes all of this quite respectable as it implicitly links fires to camping http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/Practical-guide/public/Lighting-fires suggesting people use a stove rather than light a fire (which is fine for anyone wanting to make a cup of tea) but with a tent in the background. You would

never know most campers donâ??t light fires and that many people who do light fires never camp.

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority of course used exactly the same associations â?? particularly by linking litter to campers through a series of photographs â?? to justify their proposals for the camping byelaws. The photos and associations were sufficient at the time to convince the then Minister for the Environment, Aileen McLeod, to approve the bye-law proposals. The LTTNPA has since admitted that litter is a far wider issue than campers but has not written to the new Minister saying it got this completely wrong because that would be to undermine its real agenda which is simply to ban camping. When Rothiemurchus uses similar techniques, it should make everyone ask that their real agenda is.

I believe that what the burning of the Granny Pine shows is that we need a public discussion about fires and access rights (not camping). While this should take place within some of the ecological considerations I outlined in my last post it should also extend from provision of infrastructure such as barbecue facilities/fire pits to places, like protected woodland, where there might need to be a ban on visitor fires. If the debate were framed in this way it might take us to the need for â??fire bye-lawsâ?• (not a new thing) in areas of our National Park without raising any spectre about camping bans. The truth is that camping in itself, like walking, is one of the least potentially damaging activities that take place under access rights.

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In terms of testing out any new approaches to fires, the Glenmore corridor might be a good place to do this and the Cairngorms National Parkâ??s proposed Glenmore/Cairngorm Plan a good starting point. What most people wonâ??t appreciate however is that the Rothiemurchus Estate is not included in the draft plan, not because Rothiemurchus is geographically distinct from Glenmore, but because the estate did not want to be part of it. It would prefer to do its own thing including inflaming public opinion against campers â?? hence why we need to ask what is the real agenda here? â?? and another sign of the current powerlessness of the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

Our two National Parks, which have a legal duty to promote public enjoyment of the countryside and conservation of the natural environment, should be the places where the relationship between the two are articulated in a sophisticated manner and best practice demonstrated. Fires in the countryside is just one example of this but could be a good place to start. This though is unlikely to happen in the LLTNPA, so long as it remains hijacked by nimbyists, or in the CNPA while it appears to have two hands tied behind its back.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. access rights
2. camping
3. Camping bye laws
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