

The sorry story of the destruction caused by the construction of the sheiling rope tow

Description



Work in progress on the Sheiling Poma 29th August 2015. Photo credit Alan Bratney

The planning permission that was granted to replace the shieling t-bar with a new lift, the sheiling rope tow, and to reprofile the slope was conditional on Natural Retreats keeping to the plans it had submitted, most of which were contained in the [Method Statement](#). The photo above provides proof that this was simply ignored: permission should have been clearly demarcated – it wasn't

- the works were supposed to be restricted to the area in the site plans (30m wide) – there is clear evidence of vehicles being driven over other vegetation which was supposed to be protected
- there is no sign of the terram mats on which the soil and aggregates were to be stored
- there is no sign of the turf having been removed and stored for re-use

To make matters worse, the contractors removed the boulders from the ski slope – there is no mention of what should happen to them in the Method Statement – and buried them in a big hole that they dug

outside the area granted planning permission.



The backfilled hole – Car Park t-bar in background Photo Credit Alan Bratney

They then discovered they had not read the [instructions](#) properly and that the Sun Kid rope tow they were installing required a slope of consistent gradient. Having removed boulders and soil which could have been used to re-profile the slope further, it was easier simply to take soil from somewhere nearer at hand. The result was the destruction of the bank below the bottom of the poma, which again was clearly outwith the area granted planning permission.



Destruction of the bank – photo credit Cairngorm Mountain webcam

Having failed to retain all the turf as set out in the original design, the contractors were faced with the problem of what to do with the material they didn't have enough. So what happened next?



Local Residents and their representatives were consulted about the proposed slopes. They simply couldn't see how it was going to work out, was they?

They decided to help themselves to some more material from the area.

They removed the vegetation outwith the area.

granted planning permission, plonk this down on the slopes and hope that nobody would notice.

There is clear evidence of vegetation and peat being scooped out of the ground by the diggers, including areas which had been protected from machinery during the construction of the funicular. What was worthy of protection 1999-2001 is now apparently held to be of no account. There is also extensive evidence of slopes outwith the area granted planning permission being re-seeded. This would never have been required if turf and vegetation had not been removed outwith the planning permission that was granted.



Evidence of extensive re-seeding of areas outwith that granted planning permission

There was, however, still insufficient vegetation to cover the slopes and the constant and unnecessary movement of large vehicles had in any case eroded a trackline so what better solution to turn this into a new track and again hope no-one would notice?



The top part of the new track created by the constant passage of vehicles – photo credit Alan Bratney



The straight lower section of the new track – in the far distance you can see where the middle of the track has been lined with a thin layer of soil and reseeded

After the media coverage of this track eroding away – water simply washes down it – Natural Retreats smoothed it out again and possibly added more material. It was already eroding again when I visited a week ago and the heavy rain since will have caused further damage.

What will happen next?

The Cairngorms National Park Authority admitted in public, as a result of Rob Edwards article in the Sunday Herald that there had been two breaches of planning permission, the creation of a new track bank and the destruction of the bank below the bottom of the lift. What they have not so far admitted is that there were extensive breaches of the Method Statement and these resulted in

the area worked being far broader than the 30m strip granted planning permission (in some places the damage extends at least 60m across the slope), materials being dumped and buried outwith the area granted planning permission and contrary to it and vegetation being scooped up from anywhere handy to make up the loss. The CNPA's approach at present appears to be to wait for a retrospective planning application from Natural Retreats for the unlawful track and.....not much else.

This is a missed opportunity. With Highlands and Islands Enterprise as landowner showing no signs of taking any responsibility for what has happened and Natural Retreats clearly ignoring not just the CNPA but the aspirations of all the stakeholders at Cairngorm (from the local community to skiers to conservationists) the CNPA has the chance to show that being a National Park means something. It could start by making full use of its enforcement powers and demand new measures to compensate for what has happened. If HIE and Natural Retreats do not co-operate it could join calls for the land to be transferred from HIE to the Forestry Commission and for the lease with Natural Retreats to be terminated.

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