

More proof that Natural Retreats are not fit to operate Cairngorm

Description



The earthworks at the Coire Cas T-bar started last year, not this as implied by Natural Retreats on the Paton

In a sign that they are feeling the media pressure (e.g [here](#)) Natural Retreats' [post](#) on 11th August headed "Reinstatement of Embankment" tried to portray a positive picture of what they are doing at Cairngorm.

Natural Retreats **claim** that the work on the Coire Cas gantry work "was required in order to make the structure safer following a comprehensive engineer's inspection. As we needed to ensure that the tow would be able to run at the beginning of last season, we put a short-term solution in place." **The truth is** the gantry was shut on Health and Safety grounds last year after years of neglect which Highlands

and Islands Enterprise as landlords should have picked up but which Natural Retreats had done nothing to fix this since signing the lease. In order to prevent the tow closing Highland Council agreed Natural Retreats could bulldoze earth, apparently on a de minimis basis, without planning permission to create a ramp for skiers to access the tow.



Coire Cas t-bar Photo Credit George Paton

Natural Retreats **claim** that “since the start of the summer we have been working on completing a longer term solution including the necessary groundworks.”. **The truth is** that some of the groundworks started last year, as evidenced by the top photo and the work on the rest of the

embankment did not start till July, i.e 7-8 months later, far too late in the growing season to allow vegetation to get re-established.

Natural Retreats claim that “stored turfs were relaid”. The top photo above shows that the earth moving closest to the tow took place in the snow. Its impossible to remove and store turfs in such conditions. Moreover, looking at the photos on their blog its hard to discern any evidence of stored turf – there is none at all on the widened track and only sparse vegetation on the bank which is why the reseeding pellets are so extensive.



There is no evidence of stored turf for work on the first part of the embankment because there wasn't any – the digging took place in snowy conditions – or on the widened track

Natural Retreats **claim** “This reshaped area has smoothed previously bulldozed banks, that were created during the construction of the original hill road during the 1960’s”. It is unclear what “smoothed” means but **the truth is** that the bulldozing that took place in the 1960s is well and truly back.

Natural Retreats **claim**, after what appears a reasonably accurate description of what Seed Aide does, that “We have used this technique for many past projects where it has been proven to enable regrowth and seeding by stabilising soils on steep banks”. **The truth is** that the Cairngorm Mountain company used to use this technique before Natural Retreats took it over, but Natural Retreats appear to have only started doing so very late in the year and following the outcry at the damage at Cairngorm. If they dispute this, they should be able to provide proof of when the Seed Aide was ordered and delivered.

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Destruction of re-seeded area near bottom of Shieling rope tow where a large pit was dug to dump boulders – outwith planning permission

What Natural Retreats also don't say on their blog is that in the areas where they have been re-seeding, there is still no control over vehicles and some of the recent restoration work has already been destroyed through a complete lack of care. This must be very frustrating for the people who are trying to do the restoration work.



How does this fit with claims to be protecting vegetation by storing turfs? Photo Credit George Paton

There is plenty of other evidence in Coire Cas that Natural Retreats is using vehicles inappropriately without any attempt to protect vegetation.



When is a track not a track? Rather than use the existing tracks Natural Retreats is taking shortcuts Photo Credit George Paton

I am afraid nature simply doesn't feature in the ethos of Natural Retreats

What needs to happen?

It seems to me that on grounds of environment management that Natural Retreats are simply unfit to manage Cairngorm. HIE should have all the evidence they need now to terminate the lease. I am afraid they won't, not just because of the embarrassment this would cause, or because the environmental clauses in the lease are deficient (I am awaiting a copy of their Environmental Management Plan under FOI) but because they do not care about the environment. If they did, they would have taken action long ago. There therefore needs to be a community and public campaign to remove the land from their ownership and work towards a new vision for the ski area which results in high quality ski facilities, care for the environment and an attractive place for non-mountaineers to walk and experience the mountain.

We also of course need, as this post has demonstrated, a consistent planning framework for Cairngorm so we avoid the situation where for one set of works, the Shielling Rope tow, there is a requirement from CNPA for a detailed design statement to protect the ground but then just above this Highland Council allows a piste to be widened without any design statement at all. This then needs to be backed up by effective and consistent enforcement of planning requirements. There is no point in the CNPA requiring detailed good practice statements, such as those required for the works on the Shielling Rope tow, if it then allows the applicant (in this case Natural Retreats) to simply ignore it.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. HIE
2. natural retreats
3. planning
4. restoration

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