

Natural Retreats justification for the unlawful track is full of holes

Description



Photo credit Ron Greer

Natural Retreats have finally submitted a valid planning application to the Cairngorms National Park Authority for the new track they constructed and the bank they destroyed ([see here](#)) and photo above. Neither had planning permission. As the Cairngorm ski area is part of the Cairngorm National Scenic Area all new tracks there require full planning permission. While the application will be decided by the Cairngorms National Park Authority the documents supporting the application are currently on the Highland Council website ([see here](#)).

The most important document is the [supporting statement](#) from Natural Retreats. I am afraid it bears little resemblance to reality. The CNPA should reject it for the following reasons:

- Neither Glencoe nor Nevis Range have access roads and the development of Coire na Ciste at Cairngorm was done without access roads. In fact most of the lifts at Cairngorm still don't have access roads. If maintenance on lifts is needed and materials need to be brought in, this can be done by attaching hangers to the tows or lifts. If other ski operators can do this, why can't Natural Retreats? There is nothing to justify their claim that it makes operational sense that CML wish to retain the track as it has been an investment which will allow routine maintenance and minimise ground disturbance to the surrounding ski pistes in the future.
- The real issue at Cairngorm is that Natural Retreats are driving their vehicles willy nilly without any consideration of the impact of this on vegetation or soils and what's more often fail to use the tracks that already exist. Parkswatch has published several photos to substantiate this including the failure of their staff to use the new shieling tow track just last week (see here). This makes a mockery of their claim that the opportunity to retain this as a permanent maintenance track will therefore serve this tow and others nearby, thus reducing the long-term need for vehicle access over undisturbed ground in the surrounding area. Instead of granting planning permission for the unlawful track CNPA should require Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Natural Retreats to reach a binding agreement which will keep vehicle use on the hill to a minimum. This should include requirements on the use of existing uplift facilities to move materials and require
- The original method statement, approved by CNPA, made no reference to the need of a track for construction purposes. If the vegetation had been removed in the manner specified from the top down, vehicles could have driven over the ground without destroying vegetation. What what happened was vehicles simply drove over the vegetation at will as photos below show.



Route by which vehicles accessed shieling ski tow area â?? no attempt was made to protect this vegetation and the track here appears to have been created AFTER the work on the shieling had finished. Photo Credit Alan Bratney



Construction vehicle bogged down in peat between the new track and the funicular Photo Credit George Paton

- Natural Retreats provide a single photo purporting to show re-instatement of the turf without any explanation for how this was actually done. In fact if you look at the slope concerned now a lot of the heather in the photo appears to be missing and there is extensive use of grass seed. Why?



The photo from Natural Retreats Supporting Statement simply raises more questions

Questions Natural Retreats need to answer before the planning application is considered further include:

Where are all the terram mats on which the spoiled and vegetation was supposed to be stored?

Where did the red material in the foreground come from? (There was no mention in the original planning application of either removing ground material from the area or importing material and where this would come from).

If this really does show restoration, why then did Natural Retreats allow diggers to drive all over the restored ground to dig up vegetation from outside the area granted planning permission as in photo below?



Digger ripping out vegetation (funicular support rail across top) having crossed ground that had been allegedly restored Photo credit George Paton

- The real reason I believe the track was created was because Natural Retreats had not stored turf and other materials in the required manner, were short of materials and a new track was a way of covering this up. If this is right, were the CNPA to approve the track they would in effect be endorsing Natural Retreats failure to abide by the Method Statement and undermining the credibility of the planning system.
- The track has already eroded twice but Natural Retreats is now proposing to fix this by installing 6 galvanised steel drainage channels. While a knowledgeable source has told me that these look remarkably like the crash barriers which formerly lined the public road through the council carpark in Coire na Ciste, the bigger issue is that the track, with or without drainage channels, is simply going to speed up the rate at which water runs off the hill. The bottom of the shieling slope is already a boggy quagmire â?? you can see this clearly in the photos Natural Retreats provide â?? and the track will make it worse. Everytime a track is created in the hills the speed of water run-off increases and flooding in the glens and straths increases. The CNPA stated after the Deeside floods at the end of last year it wanted to prevent the causes of flooding which start upstream. The track may only be 400m in total but every bit of additional track counts.
- The surface of the new track comprises pink granitic material. If it had come from the shieling slope it is hard to see how it could appear so clean â?? it would have been mixed with peat and fragments of vegetation judging by the photos of how the work on the slope was actually conducted. It would appear to have been brought in from elsewhere and Natural Retreats need

to explain where it has come from so that it can be returned to that place.

- Natural Retreats fail to explain that the reason the base of the lift had to be raised was their own incompetence ([see here](#)). They use this as justification for the destruction of the bank below the lift without asking anyone if they could do this and then claim “The ground levels across the site and along the regraded bank now have a far more natural contour” is rubbish. The track might have been bulldozed, but the bank this created had recovered and the vegetation on it was indistinguishable from the ground above. The bank followed the line of the burn so anyone not knowing might reasonably think that it was the result of water erosion indeed the original bank probably was. The new bank by contrast is smooth and at a constant angle and its very hard to see how such a feature could have been created by natural processes. Its more like a typical motorway embankment. The CNPA should not allow Natural Retreats to re-landscape the slopes at Cairngorm at will “where will this ever end?”

As the truth emerges, there are likely to be even more reasons for the CNPA to reject the planning application from Natural Retreats. I rather fear though that the CNPA may take Natural Retreats supporting statement at face value because of what appears in the draft minute of the Planning Committee of 8th July:

“38. Gavin [Miles, Head of Planning] provided a brief update on the planning consents and developments at Cairngorm Mountain. He confirmed that site restoration works around the replacement Shieling tow were being carried out in a satisfactory way and that the planning team would continue to monitor the site and work with Natural Retreats to achieve the restoration following construction.”

What needs to happen

The CNPA should reject the current planning application and require Natural Retreats to pay for an independent ecology survey of the damage and its implications, including the impact on drainage and flood risk. It should then require Natural Retreats to come up with proposals to reinstate the track, and compensate for the loss of the bank and other damage that has happened outwith the area granted planning permission. I have already suggested this could include restoration of montane scrub, which is slowly colonising the lower ski slopes, and which would reduce the adverse landscape impacts of the ski infrastructure, improve the skiing, reduce flood risk and provide more habitat for birds like the ring ouzel.

While one would hope that Highlands and Islands Enterprise, as the landowner, will state publicly whether they support the planning application or not and why, it will be interesting to see if they do so.

If you wish to object to the planning application, you can do so via the comment button on the [web page](#) appears or by email to planning@cairngorms.co.uk. I suggest people should ask the CNPA to require Natural Retreats to pay for an independent ecological report into the damage that has been created at Cairngorm and options to mitigate this.

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Author

nickkempe