

The destruction at Cairngorm needs to stop

Description



The foundations for the new fixed wheel at the top of the West Wall poma Photo credit Terry Smith

In May 2015 Natural Retreats were granted planning permission to Highland Council to replace the “floating” top wheel of the West Wall poma lift with a fixed wheel and to extend the run by 40m subject to certain conditions. The Cairngorms National Park Authority, in their wisdom, did not call in this application unlike the Shieling rope tow in Coire Cas and so have no formal locus in the case as planning authority. Unfortunately, while Highland Council included conditions to protect nesting birds during the breeding season, there were no other stipulations of the timing of the work. Natural Retreats started the work in September, far too late for the vegetation to recover before winter, and Cairngorm has been hit by two serious storms in the week since these photos were taken (and my thanks to Terry Smith for supplying me with photos from his visit on 23rd September). Unfortunately too, Highland Council does not appear to have enquired about what Natural Retreats meant by the

creation of a graded slope.

However, even if Highland Council had taken more care before approving the application, I am not sure it would have made a difference as Natural Retreats simply do what they like anyway.



Digger operating outwith area granted planning permission – all vehicles were meant to be carefully controlled Photo from Cairngorm Mountain webcam (thanks to George Paton)

While Natural Retreats did commit to meeting certain standards in their Method Statement ([see here](#)) there is plenty of evidence these have been ignored just like with the Sheiling Tow in Coire Cas.



“Contractor to park up any machinery on existing track, or outside top station garage, where all fuelling is to be kept” – see centre left



“Remove Turf from slopes where digger will use its reach from. Any aggregates and spoil from const
Terram geotextile to be reused in landscaping” – no sign of terram geotextile but at least some turf is
Shieling rope tow.



This aggregate is not being stored on matting as specified either. Dumping spoil like this simply destroys vegetation.



“A site cordon for access will be established to control vehicle movement and prevent damage to vegetation and new erosion caused by vehicles while the quality of the new drainage – again it appears Highland Council have specified how this work should be done, looks very poor.

If you want a preview of the outcome of Natural Retreats' failure to follow its own Method Statement there is evidence the other side of the snow fence (see photo below) where Natural Retreats installed new cabling. Highland Council in their wisdom decided did not need planning permission because it

was ancillary works to an existing development.



The failure to restore the vegetation along the line of the ditch results from a failure to remove and store it properly pending re-instatement. The granite gravel surface will now be very vulnerable to erosion.

There is plenty of other evidence of a complete lack of care taken by the contractors



Cement bag in Allt na Ciste – its not hillwalkers or even general tourists who cause most of the rubbish at Cairngorm



More rubbish from the construction blown into the burn



The standard of work on the new fencing is extremely poor. Just what quality control have HIE who this put in place How long will this bit of fence last?



The old posts which supported the chestnut fencing have not been removed but simply broken off with an attempt to clear up old cabling



A lack of care in bringing vehicles up the mountain has damaged the access track. At one time per month a vehicle was taken up the hill.

There is no excuse for Natural Retreats' failure to follow its own Method Statement and for the lack of care it has taken on the upper slopes of Cairngorm. Despite all the adverse publicity it has received over its failures to adhere to the planning requirements agreed with the CNPA for the Shielling Rope Tow in Coire Cas Natural Retreats appears to have made little attempt to improve its practice. That says a lot about how effective our public authorities have been recently in protecting the natural environment at Cairngorm. The poor standards evidenced by these photos would not have been

tolerated 15 years ago before the Cairngorms National Park was created. Whatever you think about the funicular there was a concerted attempt by our public authorities then to ensure the highest possible standards of construction. Natural Retreats now appears free to treat them as an irrelevance.

What needs to happen

- Highland Council and the CNPA as planning authorities both need to start using their enforcement powers at Cairngorm to make it very clear that breaches of planning permission will not be tolerated. They need to work together on this and while CNPA is not involved in the West Wall Poma it could and should take action to re-instate the unlawful track in Coire Cas.
- Highland Council should stop giving Natural Retreats the benefit of the doubt by assenting to works being undertaken without planning permission. There is lots of evidence that such works (eg the laying of new cable) have been far more extensive than indicated by Natural Retreats.
- Highlands and Island Enterprise as the landowner needs to start to manage all works undertaken by Natural Retreats and ensure these meet the highest standards
- The CNPA should require HIE to produce a proper Environmental Management Plan at Cairngorm (I have established through FOI requests that there is none).
- The CNPA should ask Scottish Natural Heritage to start taking an active role at Cairngorm again and quality check all Method Statements and Plans to provide public re-assurance that they meet the highest standards
- HIE, Highland Council and CNPA need to commission an independent report, which should be paid for by Natural Retreats, to survey and log all the damage that has been caused by Natural Retreats at Cairngorm and identify remedial measures.
- The Scottish Government should instigate a transfer of the Cairngorms estate from HIE to the Forestry Commission

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. natural environment
4. natural retreats
5. planning

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