

The CNPA is digging a deeper hole for itself at Cairngorm

Description



Photos of this hole and associated damage caused by Natural Retreats outwith the area granted planning consent was sent to Cairngorms National Park planners in early October a month after they were first alerted to the issues. Photo Credit Alan Bratney.

Two weeks ago the Cairngorms National Park Authority added responses from their ecology adviser ([see here](#)) and landscape adviser ([see here](#)) to the retrospective planning application from Natural Retreats for the hill track at Cairngorm ([see here](#)). While welcoming the transparency of the CNPA in making these public at an early stage (which has given the public a chance to comment) I believe the content of these assessments are not worthy of a National Park.

The Landscape Adviser has no comments to make about most of the unlawful works undertaken by Natural Retreats, such as the reprofiling of banks or the dumping of boulders or the poor quality of the finishing.



How does this fit in with the planning permission granted?

Photo Credit Terry Smith 23th S



Half exposed pipes seem of no concern to the CNPA's landscape adviser

Photo Credit Terry S

The Landscape Adviser's main comment concerns the track itself:

Within the ski area, on land previously integrated in the infrastructure of skiing, this track is acceptable as part of the landscape. The track in question consists of a short stretch, level with surrounding ground and vegetated with initial grass growth which will provide organic matter and prevent erosion of the track. Addition of drainage channels will further prevent erosion.

This is factually wrong and the thinking dangerous. The track is not a short stretch, its several hundred metres long. The angle of the top half of the track is 12 degrees, compared to the maximum angle of 8 degrees recommended by Scottish Natural Heritage to prevent erosion (see Alan Mackay's excellent [critique](#) of the retrospective planning application in which he went out and measured the angle of the track! Its essential reading for anyone concerned about this and should be read by all Board Members on the Park's Planning Committee). The Landscape report contains no consideration of the implications of installing "access tracks" alongside all the ski tows in Scotland – the cumulative impact would be considerable. The tracks are also completely unnecessary. CNPA staff seem totally unaware of the publication "Environmental design and management of ski areas in Scotland: a practical handbook" which showed tracks were unnecessary back in 1987. Nothing has changed except our Public Authorities are no longer prepared, it seems, to enforce basic environmental standards.

The Ecology assessment is also wrong on several points. In commenting on the re-profiled bank below the tow the assessment claims:

Re-grading has taken place at the bottom end of the track which has reduced the steepness of the slope, reducing erosion in this area. This slope is revegetating well.

This is wrong, there was no erosion previously as this photo from Alan Mackay's response shows:



The bank on the right of the track was covered with vegetation when work on the Shieling Rope tow started yet the CNPA claims it was eroding and appears to have used that claim as a justification for ignoring a serious breach of planning permission when Natural Retreats dug up this bank “to make it more natural” (their words). Photo Credit Alan Mackay

The ecology assessment further states:

The restoration works associated with the ski tow construction appear to be going well, won heather turves have been replaced on disturbed ground and bare areas seeded

No mention here that Natural Retreats was supposed to store all vegetation on terram matting and then replace it so there should have been no need to “win” vegetation from anywhere else. The need for re-seeding should have been minimal but in fact has been required over large areas. The Ecological Assessment makes no mention or comment on this.



Extensive re-seeding near the top of the shieling rope tow – showing how little vegetation restoration
Credit Terry Smith

Its hard to see how converting a slope from heather to grass can have no ecological impact and the ecological assessment furthermore fails to refer to the extent of the unlawful works.



Re-seeding to the south of the car park t-bar well outside the zone granted planning permission. Park diggers working here – what were they doing and why? The re-seeding shows the extent of the damage. Smith

The assessment also wrongly claims *“There is evidence of erosion on the new path which occurred during the late December 2015 storms.”* The track – its not a path, another piece of misinformation – has eroded several times already. So, who told the ecology adviser this only happened once back in December? The hill track is too steep but the ecology adviser, like the landscape adviser, appears unaware of the SNH guidance on hill track construction.



The steeper top half of the shieling track erodes each time there is a storm because its too steep and the track washes onto the surrounding re-seeded area Photo Credit Terry Smith



Is this high quality restoration work?

Photo Credit Terry Smith 23rd Sept

The truth is that the CNPA's ecological assessment of the hill track and associated works is nothing of the sort. A proper ecological assessment would have looked at the extent of the damage, the impact of the failure to restore vegetation (yes it will recover eventually but how long will this now take?), the impact of the hydrology of the area, including more rapid water run-off, and the impact on wildlife. The assessment does not even refer to the impact the works may have had on the water vole in the area, let alone other wildlife (see the [response](#) of the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group for the

potential impact of works on wildlife).



The ecological assessment makes no reference to the number of trees killed by Natural Retreats or out with diggers leaving holes across the bottom half of the slope Photo Credit Terry Smith



The ecological assessment contains no reference to the quagmire that has been created by diggers scooping holes out of the vegetation to “restore” the ski slope behind Photo Credit Terry Smith



Th ecological assessment makes no reference to all the granite gravel that has washed off the lower surrounding ground. Again the extent of destruction of the vegetation is striking. Photo Credit Terry S

The one positive suggestion in the assessment is that “there is a good opportunity to plant Dwarf Willow, Birch and Scots Pine on the re-graded bank” but why only here? As I have argued previously, one way to compensate for the extensive destruction would be for the CNPA to require Natural Retreats to employ a properly qualified contractor to plant montane scrub across the area.

I suspect responsibility for the sub-standard quality of these assessments does not lie with the staff concerned but somewhere above them in the management chain. To put it bluntly, the staff

concerned have been told to tick a box. The CNPA was first made aware of the unlawful works at Cairngorm on 4th September 2015 (I have seen the emails) and did nothing to intervene and stop Natural Retreats destroying vegetation and soils outwith the area granted planning permission. They subsequently failed to do anything substantive for over 10 months but, after being forced to admit a retrospective planning application was required, it appears that staff are doing everything they can to ensure this is approved. This behaviour is not worthy of a National Park. It provides further evidence that there must be other things going on which explain why the CNPA is allowing Natural Retreats to do what it likes at Cairngorm.

What needs to happen to ascertain the extent of the damage and its impact on Cairngorm

The argument that the CNPA should require Natural Retreats to pay for an independent ecological and landscape assessment is even stronger now that the National Park has shown it is incapable of doing this properly. Such an assessment should detail ALL the damage that has been caused at Cairngorm – not just the areas granted planning permission – and the options for restoration of the ground and vegetation.

Any proper assessment should be informed by the guidance contained in the following documents:

- The past vegetation surveys that have taken place at Cairngorm (I asked Highlands and Islands Enterprise for copies of these under FOI but they have told me all surveys since the construction of the funicular are held by Cairngorm Mountain! Why didn't the CNPA landscape adviser ask for a copy?)
- SNH's Guidance on the construction of hill tracks
- "Environmental design and management of ski areas in Scotland: a practical handbook"

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. natural retreats
3. restoration

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