

The power of landowners in the Cairngorms National Park

Description



Eroding bulldozed track with burnt heather moorland behind on Dinnet Estate September 2016

As readers will know, there are now several organisations trying to get the Cairngorms National Parks Authority to address the problems associated with grouse moors: destruction of habitats, destruction of the landscape, destruction of wildlife and destruction of the rural population. There have been several signs in the last couple of weeks that landowners are fighting back and putting considerable pressure on the CNPA to make sure the new National Park Partnership Plan contains nothing that will upset their interests.

The first was at the last CNPA Board Meeting where Grant Moir, the Chief Executive had this to report on moorland management:

“We have just received confirmation that we have been successful in obtaining funding through ECAF (Environmental Co-operation Action Fund) for the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership. This will fund project development work to enhance habitat and species diversity”.

In the draft Partnership Plan the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership was identified as the main mechanism to deliver the Park’s ambitions for grouse moors (nothing was identified for moorland estates in the rest of the National Park) and now we know why, a funding application had already been submitted. Now there are some good things about the ECAF (see here) – Hen Harrier is a priority species on moorland even if nothing is said about eagle or mountain hare – but there is nothing that I can see in the scheme about cross-compliance. Despite the recent raptor killings on Speyside, the eastern Cairngorms is where wildlife persecution has historically been most intense. So the landowners who have done most to persecute and destroy our wildlife and habitats are now being paid to restore a bit of it. The public should be very sceptical. I suspect this is an attempt by the Scottish Government to try and kick the issue of wildlife persecution in the National Park into the long grass. In response to any demand for action, they can now say “we have funded the East Cairngorms Moorlands Partnership to address these issues and need to give this time to see if it works. I hope that the CNPA will help ensure that there is transparent reporting about the objectives that have been agreed and what progress is being made. These estates need to be held to account and, as I have suggested before, any further incidences of raptor persecution should result in the removal of ALL rural payments to the estate concerned.

The second sign of the landowners fight back appeared on the CNPA blog on 7th October:

The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) met with the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) on the 29 September to discuss the National Park Partnership Plan consultation and specific issues around grouse management. The SGA raised concerns about a recent blog on the CNPA website which they felt did not reflect the work being done on grouse moors.

There was a robust exchange of views with Gamekeepers setting out their views on grouse and moorland management and the CNPA setting out the need to debate future management as part of the consultation. The meeting ended with an agreement to meet more regularly with the SGA and Moorland Groups so that further discussion can take place on these issues.

I welcomed ([see here](#)) the original blog by Will Boyd Wallis for trying to promote debate on how our grouse moors should be managed but criticised it for not being radical enough. While we already know that the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, who act on behalf of their employers, the landowners,

object to any debate on moorland management what is interesting is that the CNPA has had to give them time to air their much voiced views. The danger here is that the CNPA tries to convince itself that there is a middle way, in which the current lack of any real action is continued into the next Partnership Plan, and this is then justified as a need to hold the ring between two opposing interests.

The third sign of the pressure the CNPA is under was the open attack by Fergus Ewing, MSP for Inverness and Nairn, but now Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy in his column in the Strathie last week ([see here](#)). Fergus Ewing states the CNPA meeting with the Scottish Gamekeepers Association was *“following my intervention, subsequently arranged actually to hear the views of local keepers and others”*. In other words he forced the CNPA to meet the representatives of the people who, on behalf of the landowners, have been responsible for killing so much wildlife in the National Park. He goes on to say *“But in a letter to me the park refused to accept there was anything wrong, and refused to permit the other side of the case to be published on its website. Given that a formal park consultation is ongoing, that does not seem to be balanced or fair. The second principle of natural law is Audi Alteram Partem hear both sides of the case!”*

Fergus Ewing does not appear to realise that while there are two sides to the case on moorland management, the CNPA at present is not on either side. It has been sitting on a fence somewhere in the middle. If Fergus Ewing wants SGA's views promoted on the CNPA website he should also, according to the Latin, be calling for Raptor Persecution Scotland, the LINK hill tracks group etc to be given space on the CNPA blog.

What the SGA, the landowners and now apparently Fergus Ewing are worried about is that the CNPA might now at last, in the face of overwhelming evidence, jump off the fence and start to stand up for the conservation purpose of the National Park and develop an alternative plan for the moorlands in the National Park (some of which might be to allow these areas to go wild). This would end gamekeeping as we know it but could also create more and better paid jobs.

Fergus Ewing does not have Ministerial responsibility for National Parks but I would not underestimate the pressure he will be putting on Roseanna Cunningham, the Environment Secretary, to ensure the new CNPA partnership plan does nothing to address the destruction going on in the moorlands of our National Park. Both the CNPA and Roseanna Cunningham should stand up to both Fergus Ewing and the landowning interests which have been working on him behind the scenes.

Both should take heart from the announcement yesterday that there is to be a debate in the UK Parliament about banning driven grouse shooting on 31st October. Many of the people who signed were from Scotland and this is a clear sign that public opinion is now in favour of changing the ways our moorland is managed.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. grouse moors
4. hill tracks
5. landed estates
6. wildlife persecution

Date Created

October 14, 2016

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